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THE WORLD'S WORK (1913) LTD
KINGSWOOD SURREY

MUDDY WHEELS

Lanky Buckshot McKee and his swarthy Mexican partner, Tortilla Joe, cursed their luck—the luck that had led them to Hardrock, Arizona, where the rain never stopped and the mills, pounding ore to dust, shook the town night and day. Hardrock was booming; and the Dunlap Stages freighting line should have been booming too, with fat contracts for shipping machinery and stores to and from the railroad at Phoenix. But Dunlap Stages had a jinx on it; chains snapped, loads shifted on the wagons and fell into the road; the outfit was losing money fast, and Matt Dunlap had sent Buck and Tortilla into Hardrock to find out what was cooking, and put it right. It looked like a sticky job.

The pair had run slap into trouble. Even before they hit the town a gun-guard on a Dunlap Stages coach had blasted the air within a few feet of them, nearly knocking their horses into a canyon, and within a half hour of their arrival in Hardrock they had had a run-in with Ma Jorgenson, tough owner of a rival freight line. How the two of them sorted out Dunlap Stages' troubles makes a fast-moving Western story that comes up to Lee Floren's usual high standard.

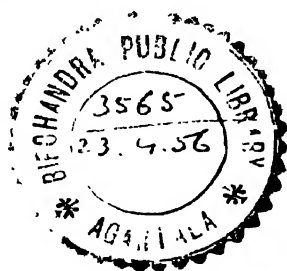
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HELL'S HOMESTEAD
FREIGHT FOR THE LITTLE SNOWIES

MUDDY WHEELS

by
Lee Floren

A
**MASTER
THRILLER
WESTERN**
No. 95



THE WORLD'S WORK (1913) LTD
KINGSWOOD :: SURREY

The characters and the incidents in this book are entirely the products of the author's imagination and have no relation to any person or event in real life.

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CHAPTER ONE

SPRING had finally come to the Rocky Mountains. The streets of Denver had snow-water running in the gutters. And lanky Buck McKee, standing in front of an office-building, owned two things: wet boots and an ornery disposition.

He studied a number over a door. And his partner, squat Tortilla Joe, watched Buck's long and dour face.

"Thees ees the place we look for, Buckshot?"

"This is where Matilda Dunlap has her officè."

The Mexican showed white teeth. "She no like to be called Matilda. She ees like to be called Matt."

They entered the building. "She's Matilda to me whether she likes it or not." Buck studied the office-register on the wall. "Floor two and number 216."

"You sound o'nery, Buck."

"I am. My boots are soppin' wet."

They climbed the stairs, water sloshing in their boots. Buck looked up and down the hall in admiration.

"Fancy outfit, Tortilla. Different than ol' Hank Dunlap's office up on Wind River. This young woman of his is a fancy one. Ol' Hank has a log office."

"Ol' Hank he ees seeck een bed."

Buck studied door-numbers. "This one." His boots made liquid sounds as he entered without knocking. They were in an ornate outer office. A hardwood filing-case, a hatrack, panelled walls, and a big desk. Behind the desk sat a spidery-looking man who wore a green eyeshade.

This man had angry eyes.

"Who are you two? Why didn't you knock?"

"This Mrs. Dunlap's outfit?"

"This is Mrs. Dunlap's office, if that is what you mean.

She is in the inner office at work and cannot be disturbed. Didn't your mother teach you to knock before entering——"

"Thanks, Greenshade."

Again boots made sloppy sounds. Greenshade grabbed Buck as Buck McKee passed the desk. His skinny fingers dug hard.

"Mrs. Dunlap is busy. She can be seen only by appointment. What is your name, sir, and what is your business?"

Buck glanced at Tortilla Joe.

The Mexican watched with a foolish smile—a disarming smile. The clerk, seeing that smile, had a sudden idea: maybe this Mexican was crazy? Tortilla Joe was not loco. The clerk did not know Tortilla Joe.

"Should I, Tortilla?" Buck asked gently.

Tortilla Joe let his wide shoulders rise, fall. "Why not?"

"Okay."

Had Buck hit the clerk hard he would have knocked him cold. He fainted with his left. The clerk hurriedly jerked down his homely head. He jerked squarely into Buck's rising right.

The clerk walked backward. Mouth open, he hit the wall; it held him. Dazedly he shook his head. He felt his mouth. He looked at his hand . . . blood.

"Do we go in, Greenshade?"

The clerk hurriedly nodded.

Moving wet boots. . . . Matilda Dunlap slept in a swivel chair with her boots on her desk. Head down, she snored; she had not heard the rumpus in the outer office.

Buck and his partner looked at her. Slowly Tortilla Joe closed the door until he heard the lock snap shut.

They looked at the wife of Old Hank Dunlap.

Buck's gaze first was on her boots. Ebony black boots . . . polished boots. Good-looking legs. A buckskin riding-skirt of soft leather that clung to well-built thighs. A thin waist, a heavy bosom. She was around forty; Old Hank was around sixty-five. An old fool with lots of money had met a scheming young widow.

Tortilla Joe clucked. "Greenshade he say shees very busy, the liar."

"Followin' orders, prob'ly."

Buck shoved her legs off the desk. The boots hit the floor.

"What the living hell——"

Matilda Dunlap's lovely head reared upward. She was blonde, she was pretty, too—a good nose, nice mouth, blue eyes. Only anger flared in those blue eyes now and made them grey. Recognition came in and the grey left.

"McKee. . . . Buck McKee."

"Got your letter, Mrs. Dunlap."

"An' Tortilla Joe, too."

Her bosom heaved and she got to her feet. An attractive woman, using woman's wiles. Her boots were dry. They didn't make a liquid sound.

"Si, I am here too, *Señora* Dunlap."

Behind them the door opened. Greenshade entered, carrying a pistol. To Tortilla Joe the barrel looked about two feet long. Greenshade's hands trembled. To Buck McKee the barrel seemed about a foot in length. Greenshade held the gun in both scrawny hands: it wavered, it shook.

"What is the matter with you?" Matilda Dunlap demanded in surprise.

"These gents—one of them hit me. They forced their way into your office. They're——"

"They're friends of mine," Mrs. Dunlap said angrily. "Get out of here and take your old rattle-trap pistol with you!"

Buck moved to one side, stepped forward, and gingerly took the old pistol between thumb and forefinger.

"Nasty little boy, Greenshade. Playing with fire-arms. . . ."

He deliberately dropped the heavy old pistol on Tortilla Joe's cold left foot.

The Mexican did not move his boot. He did not show anger. He turned big and sad eyes on his partner.

"Sometimes, Buckshot, I theenk maybe you hates me—you do not treat me so good sometimes."

"Jus' an accident," Buck murmured.

Greenshade bolted, slamming the door. He grabbed his hat and coat so fast from the rack that he toppled it. The outer door opened, slammed.

"He's quitting again," Matilda Dunlap said. "He quits about on the average of every two weeks. This time he isn't coming back." She walked to the window. She had a very pretty back and a very nice sense of the dramatic. She let time grow and become heavy.

Buck McKee did a little thinking.

First, she was old Hank Dunlap's wife.

Second, he and Tortilla Joe were old Hank's friends. Old Hank was laid up in bed, out on the Wind River Ranch. Buck realized he hardly knew Matilda Dunlap. She and the old fellow had been married about two years. She had been twice on Wind River Ranch while Buck and Tortilla Joe had worked there.

One time she had spent a month on Old Hank's biggest ranch. Old Hank had lost his first wife to death—she had been a stout, jovial ranchwoman. Where he had met this wife nobody seemed to know. His first wife had given him a son—Lincoln—now back east in some fancy cow-college. Yale, Harvard, or some high-toned joint, Buck had heard.

When old Hank had tangled with this young woman, cow-punchers and acquaintances had given the marriage a short life—rumour had gone around that Matilda had married the old timer just for his fortune.

Matilda Dunlap turned and looked at them. Blue eyes moved from one to the other; apparently she weighed them, judged them.

"Old Hank thinks a lot of you two boys. I'll get to the core of this whole thing. Most people think I married the Old Man for his money. They looked for our marriage to hit the rocks right away."

Neither man spoke.

Her rich voice went on: "I love the Old Man. I'll stick with him as long as he lets me. I'd be with him now but I have to run the office for him. But that is neither here nor there."

Her pretty legs carried her back to her chair. She sat and smoothed her buckskin skirt across her full thighs, her hands making a smooth sound against the creamy softness of the leather.

"Sit down, men."

Buck sat on the edge of a chair. He did not know what was ahead and he was anxious to find out. Tortilla Joe sat down so gingerly it appeared he was afraid the chair might break under his blubbery weight.

Buck asked, "What's the deal, Mrs. Dunlap?"

"Let's get something straight before we go any further. To you boys I am *Matt*, not *Matilda*, not *Mrs. Dunlap*."

"Matt," Tortilla Joe repeated.

Buck said, "Let's go on. You wrote us on Wind River Ranch. You wanted us to quit and come down and see you about something, and to keep it on the quiet from old Hank. Here we are."

She nodded. "Once you were in jail in Dubois. Serious charge, too—horse stealing. My husband got you out."

She was smart. Buck said, "A case of mistaken identity."

She nodded, smiled. Again she got to her feet, only this time she went to a huge wall-map. Her finger moved into Arizona Territory, then stopped.

"This is Hardrock, Arizona. Have you two ever been there?"

"Yes," Buck said.

"How long ago?"

"Ten years."

"Eight and one-half years," Tortilla Joe corrected.

Buck said, "A small cow-town. Four buildings or so. One store, a blacksmith shop, two or three saloons."

He didn't mention the town jail. That jail held unpleasant memories. Tortilla Joe didn't mention the clink, either.

"There are more buildings than four of them now," Matt Dunlap assured. "Hardrock is a booming mining town now—gold. Yes, and lots of it."

Buck nodded.

"I want you two to go to Hardrock for me," she said suddenly.

"Why?" Buck asked.

When Hardrock had started to boom about six months before, she had talked Hank into buying a freight- and stage-line that ran between Hardrock and the railhead down at Phoenix.

"It was a good buy. It made money hand over fist for two months. Now, for some reason, it is losing money."

"Why?"

"I don't know. That is what I want you two friends of Hank to find out. You have Hank's interest at heart, being such old companions of his."

Buck thought: She plays all her cards at the right time.

Tortilla Joe said, "Trouble."

The pay would be three hundred bucks a month. She would guarantee them a year's pay. That would be thirty-six hundred dollars. She wanted that freight- and stage-line put back on its boots.

"What made it lose money?" Buck asked.

"I don't know."

"Trouble," Tortilla Joe repeated.

"We want to talk," Buck said. "Outside in Greenshade's office."

She frowned. "All right."

They went into the outer office. Tortilla Joe said again, "Trouble. Stage war. Other outfit move in, fight on road." Buck said, "Three hundred per though, *amigo*. Big dough for two waddies." Tortilla Joe said, "We no *amigos* to ol' Hank. We work for him for wages; he get his money back. Trouble." Buck said, "I'm tired of punchin' cows. Three hundred bucks a month." Tortilla Joe thumbed his

bottom lip. "Three hundred," he murmured. "Three hundred. . . ."

Buck waited.

"No go," Tortilla Joe said. "Gunsmoke don't smell good."

The stink of gunsmoke covered the three hundred bucks with a cloak of danger. Buck said, "No dice."

They sloshed back into Matt's office.

Her eyes, sharp now, moved from one to the other. Her red lips opened. "Well, men?"

Buck shook his head.

Tortilla Joe shook his head.

"I've got a wife," Buck lied, "and fourteen kids."

Tortilla Joe turned his big hat between dirty fingers. He did not meet her eyes; his gaze was on the floor. He looked like a big whipped schoolboy.

"I'm a sick woman," Matt said slowly. "I look well, but my heart is bad. My doctor orders me to stay in Denver and away from all excitement."

Buck felt a pang of fear. Tortilla Joe looked up with worried eyes.

"I love my husband. He is sick now and he needs me—and he needs every friend he has. I am going to fight for what my husband owns." Her voice rose a little shrilly. "And I thought you two were his friends—were grateful!"

"It will lead to gun-play," Buck said. "Gun-play means somebody dies. We both don't own bullet-proof carcasses."

"But I thought you had loyalty and——"

Suddenly Matt Dunlap stopped speaking. Her mouth opened, she stood up; her head went down, and she moaned. She slumped in her chair, hand over her heart.

"In my desk—powder—get some water. . . ."

Tortilla Joe dug open a drawer. Buck had never seen the Mexican move so hurriedly. He had a glass of water from the tap.

The powder turned the water to milk-coloured water.

Tortilla Joe got the glass to Matt's lips. She drank and they waited, her head down. Finally she looked at them.

"The excitement——"

"Take it easy," Buck counselled.

Suddenly, her head went down on her arms. She sobbed loudly. Her pretty shoulders rose and fell.

"I'll go to Hardrock myself! I'll do what nobody else—not even Hank's friends—will do——"

She stopped talking. But she still wept.

Buck looked at Tortilla Joe. The Mexican had sad, dog-gish brown eyes. Their eyes met and held.

Tortilla Joe nodded.

Buck shrugged.

"We'll head for Hardrock pronto," Buck said.

"You will? Oh——"

Buck and his partner left. Greenshade came out of an office, saw them, started to duck back in. Buck grabbed him by an arm.

"Your boss is sick. Get a doc for her."

Buck shoved him against the wall. Greenshade darted for Matt Dunlap's office. Buck's boots made watery sounds. Tortilla Joe's boots made liquid noises. They sloshed down the stairs.

"These womens—when theengs get tough, they turn on the tears. I wonder eef she really loves Hank?"

"My boots," said Buck McKee, "are full of water."

CHAPTER TWO

THE stage rocked around a corner on the narrow mountain road. Through the driving rain Buck McKee and Tortilla Joe saw it suddenly loom down on them—a rapidly-moving vehicle. Hurriedly they reined to the edge of the mountain trail. Below them the canyon tumbled away into a misty depth of rock and pine trees.

The driver made his whip talk. The snarl of it even rang above the sloshing of wheels, the hoofs of the six horses.

"Outa the way, cow-dogs!"

Buck thought for a moment that the stage would push him and his bronc off the road, and he had a sudden fear. Tortilla Joe's horse, although tired, reared and pawed the air, almost going backwards into the canyon. At one time the side of the lurching stage was only a foot or so away.

He got a clear glimpse of the driver—a bony, angular man with long handle-bar moustaches. He leaned back on his seat, boots braced on the dashboard, ribbons taut as his three-team rig swayed. Beside him sat a squat man with a long-barrelled shotgun.

This man swung the shotgun around, and it blasted twin holes into the rainy air. Beebees sang overhead. Behind the stock of the shotgun the man showed yellow, ugly teeth in a snarling laugh. Buck instinctively ducked, anger flooding him. He realized, then, the man had shot not to hit him, but to scare his bronc. Then the stage was gone, rolling down the slope madly; it went into the rain and became lost from view.

Tortilla Joe had his frightened, lunging bronc under control. "He do that on purpose, Buckshot! He want to drive us off into canyon, the *perro*!" His full dark face was flushed with satanic anger. "We catch the stage an' jerk

them *hombres* off that seat an' beat them to a *bonch* of bones, no?"

"No," Buck said.

"Why not? You got the cold boots, no?"

Buck had his bronc under a stern rein. He showed a tight little smile. "Yes, *cold* boots is right. Use your head, friend. We can catch them, but what can we do, with that gent handling that shotgun like that? Besides, use what little brains *Señor Dios* gave you."

"We meet them in Hardrock. . . ."

"That's right."

They were in the mountain country of northern Arizona Territory. On the long ride down from Denver they had had only one clear day. The rest of the time raw rain had come out of overcast Spring skies. Now the wind talked through pine and spruce and whistled off igneous ledges. Each had nine hundred dollars in his pocket—the three-months pay in advance given them by Matt Dunlap.

"There was a name painted on that stage," Tortilla Joe said. "Me, I could not have the time to read it——"

"Dunlap Stages," Buck McKee said.

"We works for Dunlap Stages," the Latin said. "Then one of our own stages they try to drive us eento the canyon. . . . Thet hombre weeth the scatter-gun he ees the gun-guard?"

"Prob'ly hauled some gold to Phœnix an' are comin' back," Buck said.

They came to a sign that read: *HARDROCK, three and one half miles*. Within that distance they met another stage-coach, this one heading toward Phœnix. It did not carry a shotgun guard. The driver waved to them in a friendly manner and saw that they received their half of the road.

Then the stage was gone, disappearing into the misty rain.

"That stage she ees have letters on heem, too, Buckshot."

"Western Freight."

"Our enemies," the Latin said.

"We keep our eyes open an' our mouths shut for a few days," Buck cautioned. "We scout the lay of the land carefully. Nobody is our enemy until he so declares himself."

"Si, we play close cards, no?"

They also met a freight-wagon going toward the railhead. It carted out broken-down mining machinery—a wicked and heavy load. Mud sucked at the wide wheels and the mules lay against collars. On its side was painted *Western Freight*. A grey tarp, soaked with rain, covered the load. The driver waved and jerk-lined his lead mule slightly to get him on a drier part of the road.

"Our enemies again, no?"

They loped around a corner and the town of Hardrock lay below them—sprawled out on each side of a canyon. Unpainted buildings, recently constructed of raw Arizona pine, glistened, wet with rain. The main street meandered along like a crooked snake sunning himself. At the far end of the main street, perched on the side of the mountain, Buck saw two constructions made of galvanized tin—sprawling long buildings on land that had been levelled out of the mountain.

"The mines, no?" Tortilla Joe asked.

"Looks like mines to me," Buck grunted. "New buildings and lots of tents. Gold makes fools of them."

"Gold brought us here."

Buck nodded. "Still, we're doing it for ol' Hank Dunlap, laid up with a siege of sickness."

"Me, I likes ol' Hank."

The road twisted down the hill and spliced itself on to the end of Hardrock's main street. The grade had quite a percentage, and Buck judged it would be hard to climb with a load because of the mud. Even if the weather cleared up and became dry the grade would still be hard to climb. He didn't know much about freighting. He didn't know much about Hardrock, nor did he know much about Western Freight and Dunlap Stages. Matt Dunlap, it had turned out, had never been in Hardrock.

She had bought Dunlap Stages sight-unseen, seeing the ad

for sale in the *Denver Post*. She had had a Phoenix real-estate outfit handle the deal. Old Hank had so much money it had to be invested somewhere.

Tortilla Joe said. "Thees town she has changed, Buck-shot, since when we were een the jail."

"Forgit thet," Buck ordered.

"Nobody here weel remembet us from eight years or more."

"Hope not."

The jail was still there—a brick building. If you looked hard you could see that the bricks below one window seemed newer than the rest of the bricks. Also, the mortar, even after almost a decade, looked a little fresher than the rest of the mortar. They had done a good job of repairing the hole through which Buck and Tortilla Joe had made their escape.

Buck smiled.

The main street teemed with humanity—miners with lunch-pails and lights on their caps, miners' wives and a few children, and occasionally an unescorted young woman—some of them painted and looking rather adventuresome. One hussy caught Buck's eye, and he winked at her; she winked back brazenly. Tortilla Joe saw this and smiled widely.

"You stay away from the womens, Buck."

"You do the same," Buck retorted.

Both were hungry, so they headed toward a sign that proclaimed: **HARDROCK CAFE**. Five cowboys roared down the street, pistols talking; they almost rode over Buck and Tortilla Joe, who hurriedly reined up on the plank sidewalk, thereby stopping all pedestrian traffic for a minute. One miner cursed them, asking if the road were not wide enough for them: did they have to ride horses on the sidewalks? Buck said nothing, and Tortilla Joe spat at the man, barely missing him. The miner dropped his lunch-pail, doubled up his fists, and came toward them. By this time the cowboys had raced around the corner and the partners, apparently not seeing the irate miner, put their broncs back

into the rutted, muddy street. The crowd swallowed the miner and his anger.

Buck said, "Such manners, Tortilla Joe. What would your mother say if she had seen you spit on thet man?"

"I meesed heem."

Buck gave himself over to a minute scrutiny of this wild boom town. Some of the buildings were made of logs, some of fresh-sawed raw lumber, and some were huge tents, their grey canvas tops moving lazily in the wind. He had been in boom towns before, and he knew their evil temperaments. Hardrock had all the earmarks of a maverick fresh out of purgatory. It hummed and buzzed, and back on the slope the mines ground out ore—you could hear the monotonous thud of the stamps smashing hardrock ore. Boots made noises on the sidewalks, voices were raised in loud tones—yet the sounds could not kill those made by the stamps on the hill.

"There she ees Dunlap Stages' office, Buck."

Dunlap Stages had its office on the east side of the street. The building was made of logs and covered about a hundred-feet frontage. Then it ran back deep and had the barn behind it. Because of the false front a man could not see its true depth, but Buck found himself thinking that behind the building would be a storage lot for rigs and other equipment. All in all, it was quite an outfit, even though the logs suffered from a lack of paint.

A wide door was to the south end of the building. Evidently stages went in and out of this directly out on Hardrock's main street. The door was open, and Buck could see benches along the wall where passengers could sit to wait for the stage to move out of the rear compound to be loaded. The rest of the building had two windows, and was evidently the office.

"There she ees Western Freight's office, Buck."

Western Freight was on the west side of the street, and at the end of the block. It also had a wide door in its front where passengers could enter and leave the stages. It also

had an office fronting the main drag. But it was made of lumber, and was painted a neat green with white trim on window casings and door casings. And its windows were sparkling clean in contrast to the dirty cobweb-filled windows of Dunlap Stages.

The waiting-bench of Dunlap Stages held only three passengers. The bench of Western Freight was filled, and some passengers even stood with their backs against the wall as they awaited a stage-coach. Buck noticed this and scowled. From all appearances it looked as though Western Freight was running Dunlap Stages out of business, just as Matt Dunlap had stated.

"Me, I am the hongry, Buck."

They were in front of the Hardrock Café. Buck said, "We eat here." They went down, boots hitting the muddy street, and they managed to find tie-space along the hitch-rack, for the hitch-rack was almost filled with reins. Every hitch-rack in town seemed to hold horses. Hardrock had indeed changed.

"Wonder if the same old town marshal he ees here yet, Buck?"

"Think of somethin' nice, Tortilla Joe."

Buck went under the hitch-rack, bending his height, while squat Tortilla Joe waddled around the end of the tie-pole. Rain broke in suddenly, smashing at them, and they hurried into the Hardrock Café. The door was made of planks and had no glass in it. Had it had a glass Buck could have seen the man who lurched backwards toward the door, propelled by firm hands that grasped him by the vest.

As he opened the door, the man collided with him.

The man was walking backwards, and he hit Buck hard. Buck pushed him, turning him, and the man fell over a chair, hitting the floor. He gasped, "What the——!" and he said, "Pardon me, stranger, but this woman——"

The man's shoulder had ploughed into Buck's belly. Its hard force had momentarily knocked the wind out of him. He bent over and behind him he heard Tortilla Joe say,

"You ees almost knock me down when you bumps eento me."

Buck got his breath, straightened.

He looked at the person who had propelled the man into him.

At first, he had thought this was another man; then, he remembered the fallen man's words. A woman had been slapping the gent across the face. And what a woman, Buck realized, staring at her.

CHAPTER THREE

Buck looked at her.

She looked at him.

She was big. About fifty, he judged. She had wide shoulders and she weighed about two fifty, or around that. She wore a man's clothing—boots, a pair of waist-overalls, a blue shirt. Her hair, turning grey, hung to her shoulders. She had a horse-looking face—a heavy underjaw, thin lips, a wicked nose. Her eyes were blue—a pale Norwegian blue—and her brows were heavy.

"Sorry, stranger," she said.

Her voice was a man's voice—coarse and deep.

Buck said, "My fault, madam. I got in your way."

"You're awful slow on your feet," she said sourly. "You wouldn't make much of a fist-fighter. Gotta move your feet fast to fist-fight." She sourly studied the man on the floor. "You got any more to say, fella?"

"Not a word, Ma."

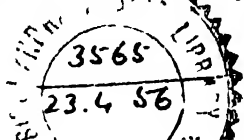
"Then git on your hoss an' ride outa here pronto. You ain't on my pay-roll no longer. Stop at the office an' git your pay an' skeedaddle."

"If you wasn't a woman, Ma, I'd bat you across the mug!"

"I don't wear no dress," Ma said pointedly. "Come ahead, mister, an' I'll trim you with my fists!"

Buck and Tortilla Joe had reached the counter and were safe on stools. The rest of the café's occupants watched the man consider this momentarily. But evidently a woman was still a woman, even though she had discarded a petticoat for a pair of pants.

"Can't do it, Ma." The man grinned crookedly. "Might be around later, when you've had a chanct to cool off. I'd



like to keep on handlin' ribbons for Western Freight. Jes' 'cause we've had a misunderstandin' ain't no sign——"

"You're canned. Now git outa my sight."

The man shrugged, smiled crookedly, and left. Ma dusted her big-knuckled hands one against the other and studied Buck McKee and Tortilla Joe. "I'm Ma Jorgenson," she introduced. "I own Western Freight Lines."

Buck nodded. "Glad to meet you, Ma. I own nothin' but an empty belly, which I aims to fill right pronto."

"This is the place, men. Best grub in Hardrock. Be you boys skinnners, by any means? I need a coupla good ribbon-hands."

She dug a red bandanna out of a back pocket and blew her nose violently. It sounded like a goose honking as he headed north in the Spring. Buck looked at Tortilla Joe, and only the Mexican saw his partner's wink.

"We're not together, Ma. We jes' happened to walk in here together. Met on the outskirts an' happened to ride into Hardrock in a pair."

Tortilla Joe stared, mouth opened slightly; then, the significance of the wink registered, and he nodded silently.

"I come here to work for Dunlap Stages," Buck lied.

Violently Ma Jorgenson pushed the bandanna back into her pocket. "You ain't workin' for a much-account outfit," she said pointedly. Her eyes swung over to Tortilla Joe. "How about you? You ever jerk-line a freight team, fella?"

Unnoticed, Buck's boot slowly pressed down on Tortilla Joe's boot.

"Me, I drive jerk-line onct, down in Sonora."

"You're hired."

Tortilla Joe lifted his hand in protest. "Not so fast, woman. How much each month you pay me, no?"

"Pay is secondary," Ma Jorgenson rumbled. "The main thing is loyalty to your outfit, fella."

"Pay is first with me."

Ma Jorgenson looked along the line of diners. They were all listening. She spoke to the café in general.

"That's the trouble with the people of today. They want money, money, money—loyalty is a dead word." Her pale eyes switched back to Tortilla Joe. "One hundred bucks and found and a floppin' bed."

Tortilla Joe spoke to the waitress. "How much I make in the mines?"

A man said, "About seventy per is tops, fella, even for a good powder-man, 'cause powder-monkeys are hard to find."

Buck's boot applied more pressure.

"I take the works," Tortilla Joe said. "I start works een the mornin'. Now for some chuck."

"You start work this afternoon," Ma corrected. "Within half an hour you're on the job at my barn, savvy?"

"I be there."

Buck released the pressure. Ma Jorgenson regarded him with a strange curiosity. "So you're goin' work for Dunlap Stages, eh? Well, been nice knowin' you, you long handled drink of alkali water!"

She stalked out. Behind her the door slammed violently. Buck smiled, the diners laughed; evidently this woman was a woman of violent likes and dislikes. The waitress took their orders and the place settled to normal conversation. Tobacco smoke hung in grey ropes. The mills pounded, jarring the earth. Outside men and women went by, and the noise of them mingled with the pounding of the mills. Hardrock was really alive.

Tortilla Joe spoke quietly. "Buckshot, you ees got me een the troubles already. You work for Dunlap Stages an' I work for thees wild woman. I do not like to leave my old partner."

"Keep your mouth shut, your eyes and ears open, and we'll make more progress. Here comes the girl with our vittles."

They tied into the grub with great ambition. Further conversation was out, and the inner man was stoked again with fuel. Buck looked at his fork and had his thoughts, and the

thoughts were not all centred on the luscious fried chunk of ham suspended on the tines of his fork.

He was thinking of Ma Jorgenson.

Matt Dunlap had not told them that the owner of Western Freight was a woman—and what a woman! Maybe Matt had tricked them into another mess of trouble? Maybe she had known all the time that Western Freight was owned by a woman, but she had wisely not mentioned it in Denver? Matt was a smart one. For instance, her heart attack—by this time it had soaked in on Buck McKee that that heart attack had been faked.

Buck smiled.

"What you smile about? Me, I am no happy. I have to get to works, and work an' me ees deevorced."

"You got a pocketful of money," Buck pointed out. "You got your good looks and you got youth. What more do you want?"

"My health, she ees bad," Tortilla Joe said, and grinned. "I can hardly chew this hams, Buckshot, I am so weak."

Buck said, "Matt Dunlap sucked us in, compadre. Only for that salary—I wonder if I can get a job with Dunlap Stages, after making that wild boast to Ma Jorgenson? I might wind up working for Western Freight along with you."

"The good Lord he forbid that!"

Buck picked at a wisdom tooth and smiled. His attention was attracted by the girl who had just entered. She was small—not over five feet—and she had raven-dark hair. She had quick dark eyes and a finely formed face that spoke of character and intelligence.

"Hello, Nita," the waitress said.

Nita said, "Hello, Maud. They tell me my mother was in here causing a disturbance. Is that true?"

"She fired one of your mule-skinners."

Nita's dark eyes glistened with merriment. "Mother has been laying for that fellow for some time. They never have liked each other. I don't know why she hired him, but that's

Ma Jorgenson for you—you never can tell what she will do next. Did she break up any furniture or cause you any damages? If she did I'll gladly pay for them."

"She broke nothing," the waitress said. "But she did hire a mule-skinner while she was in here."

"She did! Is he here now?"

"Over there."

The waitress designated Tortilla Joe.

Buck watched Nita walk toward them. She was a beauty. How Ma Jorgenson—raw-boned, ugly Ma—could have such a lovely daughter was beyond his comprehension. Like begats like, he had heard; in this case that saying had been wrong. Her dark eyes roamed over him and her red lips parted to say: "Did my mother just hire you, sir?"

"Not me," Buck said. "This gent."

The eyes moved with liquid ease over to Tortilla Joe, who almost squirmed, although his smile was as wide as an open gate.

"Oh, this man. . . . Welcome to our concern, sir. I'm Nita Jorgenson. That was my loud-mouthed mother who hired you."

Tortilla Joe managed to say, "The pleasure she ees mine, señorita. Now we go to work, no?"

"If you have eaten."

"Me, I have et."

Tortilla Joe hooked his arm with that of Nita and went to the front of the café, where he paid the cashier. Then Buck's partner was gone, his arm still latched to that of the lovely young brunette.

Buck smiled. But it was a sour smile. Luck, for once, had played into Tortilla Joe's hands. The man sitting beside him said, "The lucky stiff. Everybody who can breathe has made a play for Nita."

The man smelled of garlic, whisky, rum, and beer. He had a breath that would have made a lariat coil up automatically and sneak into a corner.

"Hard one to touch, eh?" Buck wanted to know.

The man nodded and belched garlic. "You workin' for Dunlap Stages, eh? You're new, of course. Heard that outfit had ads out in distant papers for help. You ever meet Spider LaMarr?"

"Who is he?"

"Boss of Dunlap Stages. Tall and thin gent what packs two guns an' knows how to use them, they tell me. One of his top drivers is a gun-slammer, too, they relate—gent named Barrel MacShane."

Buck merely nodded.

"Here comes MacShane now," the man murmured.

Buck looked at the man who had just entered. He was a thick-chested, short individual who walked with a cocksure and rambling gait, long arms on each side reaching almost to the tops of his muddy boots. Buck McKee picked at his sore wisdom tooth and remembered things.

A Dunlap Stages stage-coach had almost crowded him and Tortilla Joe off the narrow mountain trail. He remembered the bony, angular driver, but the memory of the driver faded into nothing as he remembered the shotgun guard. That guard had blasted a shotgun over their heads.

Then that man had shown yellow teeth in a snarling laugh as he and Tortilla Joe had tried to hold down their frightened broncs. That man had deliberately shot close to them to scare them and their weary horses.

That guard had been nobody else than Barrel MacShane.

MacShane ambled forward, long arms swinging. His piggyish eyes, looking from under brush-thick eyebrows, found Buck McKee, and Buck was sure recognition flared across them, for recognition pulled the man's eyes into narrowed lines. Buck looked at him with a level straightness.

MacShane stopped, swinging his head as he looked up and down the line of seats, every one taken.

"No empty seats, eh?" he muttered to the world at large.

Buck heard a voice that sounded like it came from a deep cavern. He saw a thick and gross waist surrounded by a gunbelt laden with cartridges. MacShane packed one gun—

a Colt .45—and it was tied low to a granite-like thigh. Buck kept on picking his teeth, his meal finished. He had a sudden dislike arise in him. He kept remembering that stage-coach rocking by, and he remembered the twin blasts from the double-barrelled shotgun. Those beebees had come mighty close.

Also, he had to get in good with Spider LaMarr. From what the drunk had told him, Spider was a tough one—therefore he would hire only tough men. Buck decided he would show Spider LaMarr how tough he was.

He studied Barrel MacShane, eyes cold. The thought came that maybe he had bit off more than he could chew and swallow. This gent had a torso like a tree-trunk, and if he connected with a hard blow—— Buck abandoned his first wild plan. There was no percentage in getting beat-up by this human ape. He started to slide off his stool.

“Here’s a stool, Big Boy.”

Barrel MacShane made an error in judgment. He figured that this stranger was afraid of him and therefore was anxious to move away and give him a place to rest his posterior.

“Mighty good thing, cowpoke, that you decided to make way for a *man*. If you hadn’t, I’d ’ve made you git off’n thet stool.”

Buck said, “You don’t say?”

“You heard me.”

The harshness of Barrel MacShane’s voice had stopped all conversation. The counter became very quiet. Necks swivelled and eyes watched them. Buck glimpsed the pretty little waitress with her hand to her throat, her eyes wide with fear. But he had no eyes for the little girl. His eyes were on Barrel MacShane.

Buck pulled himself back on the stool. “Reckon I’m not done with chuck yet. I still gotta git that piece of apple pie, waitress. Reckon I got off this stool ahead of time.”

MacShane wet his thick lips. “Ain’t I seen your homely mug somewhere before today, cowpoke?”

Buck had his back to the counter. One foot was anchored

on the floor; the other hung idle. He never missed a gesture this man made.

"A shotgun," he said quietly. "You shot over my head. On the grade, in the rain. Remember?"

"I sure do, fella. Now, get off'n the stool, or I'll give you somethin' else to remember Barrel MacShane by, savvy?"

"Somethin' nice, eh?"

"Yeah, if you wanna call a fist-beatin' a nice thing——"

Buck's upper-cut clipped short the rest of MacShane's words. Using his one boot as a pivot point, Buck struck as he turned on the stool—the blow smashed into MacShane's thick lips.

It was like hitting a stone wall.

But the blow knocked Barrel MacShane backwards. He hit the far wall, and this steadied him. Blood showed at the corner of his big mouth. He wiped it away, looked at his hand, and then, without warning, he went for his .45.

His hand went down fast. Then, it stopped, fingers around the gun's grip. And the piggish eyes, yellow with hate, stared at Buck's .45. They lifted to see Buck McKee's slow grin.

"Forget that gun, fella."

MacShane paused, indecision fighting within him. Anger demanded he draw and shoot; discretion demanded he lift his hand empty. Anger and wisdom collided, and Buck read the battle's progress on the wide and ugly face. Gradually Barrel MacShane regained his level head.

"Yes," a squeaky voice said suddenly, "forget that gun, MacShane."

CHAPTER FOUR

Buck didn't dare take his gaze away from Barrel MacShane. The man was dangerous at all times; Buck had met this kind before. He saw a great change come over the toad-like teamster. MacShane's eyes widened, his hand left his gun, and his giant mouth opened, his thick lips quivering. He got the appearance, suddenly, of a dog—a whipped, almost cringing, cur.

"All right, Boss."

Buck then looked at the man who had spoken to MacShane. He was not a striking-looking man. His body was long—very, very long; one got the impression he was far too thin for his height, for he was over six feet. Buck was an inch over six feet, himself, yet this man was taller than he.

Again Buck remembered the stage-coach rocking down on him and Tortilla Joe. And he remembered the gaunt man who had tooled the ribbons on the plunging six-horse team. This man was the driver of that stage!

The man turned his gaze on Buck McKee. He had faded grey eyes, a long thin nose, and thin lips that showed white teeth—even teeth, finely kept. He eyed Buck with a vacant stare that told the lanky cow-puncher nothing. And when the man spoke he spoke with an unhurried deliberateness.

"I'm Spider LaMarr," he said. "I've met you before?"

"The mountain grade, LaMarr. About an hour ago."

Memory brought back things to Spider LaMarr, but nothing showed in his faded blue eyes. "Oh, yes, you and a Mexican. And Barrel MacShane here used his shotgun. He didn't aim to hit you. If he had, you two wouldn't have been here now. MacShane was only playing with you two."

Buck spoke cynically. "Right nice way to play with

strangers, LaMarr." So this man, then, was the boss of Dunlap Stages—this lean, hungry-looking man who toted two guns, and looked like he could use both of them. Everything had gone wrong. Buck realized he had got off on the wrong boot. Was it too late to repair the damages? He had said he had come in to work for Dunlap Stages, if they would hire him. Well, here was the gent who did the hiring and the firing for the spread.

Again that calm, cold voice. "Barrel MacShane is very sorry, fellow. He wants to apologize, don't you, MacShane?"

"No, damn it, I don't!"

The eyes moved in their sockets and settled on MacShane. "Aren't you rather hasty, Barrel?"

Their eyes held, locked, and it was MacShane who looked away.

"Okay, fella," he told Buck. "I'm danged sorry."

"Accepted," Buck said.

MacShane showed an unhealthy smile. "All sunshine and light. No hard feelings, and someday we'll have tea together." He cursed angrily. "I'm gettin' outa this place!"

He took himself out the door, slamming it hard behind him. But still conversation was hushed along the counter. For the faded eyes of Spider LaMarr were boring into the eyes of Buckshot McKee.

"The Mex?"

"He ran into a woman, and he went to work for Western Freight. We just happened to meet and ride into town together."

Spider LaMarr nodded, the movement automatic—it could signify anything. His voice did not raise a bit as he asked, "Somebody told me you wanted to sign on as a hand with the Dunlap Stages outfit?"

"This town has a lot of ears. I just made that statement a few minutes ago, and already you know about it."

"I have ears out to listen for me. Hired ears. . . ."

Buck smiled. "I suppose the bet is off now. I jumped

your ace wolf-dog, and I reckon that queers me with the big boss. . . ." He got to his feet and went to the cash register. Spider LaMarr did not follow him. He turned slowly, watching Buck; he had sad, lonesome eyes.

Buck said, "How much are the damages, honey?"

The girl told him. Prices were high in this boom town, but that, also, was an old habit of boom towns. Buck shelled out coins. He speared another fresh toothpick and looked at Spider LaMarr, who was still watching him. LaMarr stood alone, legs spread out, eyes without thoughts.

"You sound all right. What's the handle?"

"Buck McKee."

LaMarr canted his small head, eyes thoughtful now. "Sounds a bit familiar. Yes sir, it does."

Buck smiled and joked, "Might be, if you've ever been a sheriff or marshal, LaMarr."

A voice behind him said, "I'm the marshal here, stranger."

Buck turned, toothpick at a belligerent angle. Too many people in this wild town had the bad habit of sneaking up behind him and then talking! It had been almost a decade since he and Tortilla Joe had made the local jail. For almost ten years he had not seen the marshal who had jailed them. But here he was standing in the doorway, the same lawman who had thrown him and Tortilla Joe into the jug!

Buck thought, *What if he remembers me?* That thought held no sunshine. He remembered the patch that had been put on the jail—even after all these years, he and Tortilla Joe could still discern its outline against the older section of the jail. But he kept his face emotionless.

"That's nice, fella," he said. "I have a bit of advice, though. It might add to how many years you will live."

"What's that?"

"Don't ever, ever come behind a man like you came behind me."

"What's your handle?"

Buck told him. The man scowled, looked hard at him,

said, "Name sounds familiar. You ever been in this burg before, McKee?"

"Never."

The man was still thoughtful. "Word came to my office down the street that you had a run-in with Barrel MacShane. That right?"

"He drew on me," Buck said. "Ask the crowd here, if you don't believe me?"

The marshal looked at the pretty waitress. "Mr. McKee is right," she said. "Barrel tried to pull his gun on him."

"Self-defence, Elsie?"

She said, "That's it, Marshal White."

The marshal said, "Fella, it ain't wise to stay in town. Why don't you take your pony and hightail outa Hard-rock?"

"That an order, Marshal?"

The shoulders lifted, fell. "No, don't call it that. Your belly is full, you're in fine health, and a boom town has bad foul air—hard on a man's lungs. Call it advice."

"My mother took her mother's advice. She married my father. The old man never lived a day without my mother harping on him. The old man told me never to take advice from anybody. I never have and never will."

"You crossed a dangerous man."

Buck corrected. "I never crossed him. He crossed me. He just the same as went out of his way and asked me to hit him."

"He's right," Elsie said.

Buck said, "Thanks, honey."

The marshal said, "All right, McKee, have it your way. We'll give you a good funeral, eh, boys?"

"We sure will, Marshal White."

"We'll pick out a burial spot right now," another man joked.

The tension was broken. White walked over to the counter and ordered a cup of coffee and slid into the seat Buck had just vacated. Buck looked at Spider LaMarr, then went out-

side. He hadn't been in the restaurant long. But he had been in there long enough to really foul things up. Circumstances had really tripped him up in his own catch-rope.

What would Matt Dunlap say? Here he had come to Hardrock to straighten out the affairs of Dunlap Stages, and he had hit a couple of gents as ringey as a muley cow with screw-worms. He had hoped to join the forces of Dunlap Stages and work from inside, but right off the bat he had tangled horns with Spider LaMarr's top hand and, what was worse, he had shown that top hand in a bad light.

People pushed along, a mob of humanity surging back and forth, evidently trying to wear out the pine-plank sidewalks. A young woman, wearing a dress with leg-of-mutton sleeves, smiled at him, sidled up and took his arm. She worked at the Silver Slipper, she said; would he accompany her to that establishment? Buck told her he was broke, and her interest waned immediately, her hand losing its pressing affection. Soon she went by on the arm of a miner. She did not know Buck.

Buck stood beside the hitch-rack, trying to think. Tortilla Joe left the office of Western Freight and came across the street. He untied his horse and said softly, "I work from the inside at Western Freight, Buck. I take my bronc there to the barn. I weesh you the lucks."

"Same to you, pard."

Tortilla Joe untied his horse, led him into the wide doorway over which was the sign: *Western Freight*. He and his pony disappeared into the black maw of the stable.

Buck remembered the scheming, slow look that had come into Marshal White's eyes. That lawman had a long, long memory. Buck wondered if he kept any books. He had a sudden idea. He went down the street and entered the open door of the marshal's office. He was alone in a dirty room that had cobwebs over the door and in the corners. The windows looked like they had never been washed.

Hurriedly Buck did some mental arithmetic, finally setting the year in which he and Tortilla Joe had been jailed

in Hardrock. Ledgers were piled against the wall, one for each year's work, and he selected the one he wanted. He took it out the back door, slipped into a shed, and looked through the ledger. Finally he found the entry he wanted.

Tortilla Joe (last name unknown), six months in jail, disturbing the peace. Buck McKee, also six months, same charge.

Down below this entry was another item, and Buck read it with a wry smile.

Escaped from jail this day, Tortilla Joe (last name unknown) and Buck McKee. (See entry above). Law offices across Territory notified. Charge still open.

Buck thought, *I got the right ledger*. He wondered if any other record of this was kept, and he decided against that point. Had there been another record it would have been keyed into this ledger entry. He looked around and spied a shovel in the corner. He pried loose a floor-board in the shed and dug a hole and buried the ledger. Then he put the board back in place, pounding down the rusty nails with the back of the shovel. This done, he grinned and replaced the shovel in the corner.

He went outside, glanced up and down the alley, and saw nobody. Then he crossed a vacant lot and reached the main street again. His horse was tired and he needed hay and water and a rest in the livery barn. Buck was untying the animal when he heard the high voice of Spider LaMarr behind him.

"I been looking for you, McKee."

Buck eyed the stage-line boss. "What is it, Spider?"

"I want you to come to work for Dunlap Stages."

Buck took this with an inner excitement his face did not show. This was not logical. He had called Dunlap Stages' ace gunman, had showed him up, and here the boss of the stage-line was asking him to skin mules for him.

Buck's thin face was wooden. "What about me an' Barrel

MacShane? He ain't one to sit back an' take trouble without hittin' back, LaMarr."

"I'll handle MacShane, McKee."

Buck nodded.

The dull, dead eyes roved over his face. He could almost feel the imprint of them, they were that heavy. "I need a tough man like you on my side, McKee."

Buck said, "I'm on your pay-roll, LaMarr."

Only then did Spider LaMarr smile. And the smile was thin and twisted and ugly against his homely long face.

CHAPTER FIVE

BARREL MACSHANE swore with monotonous regularity. "Men, you gotta git thet jack back futhern that under that axle, or you'll lose the whole damn' load! Git the jack back there a piece, then raise the wagon up, an' we'll look at thet axle."

The squat man had a Negro and an Irishman trying to get the left rear wheel off a high-wheeled Hudson wagon. Then he heard Buck come up behind him, and he turned with a sudden ease that seemed out of place when measured against his huge bulk. At the sight of Buck McKee, his forehead showed a deep frown.

"What're you doin' here, McKee?"

"Goin' rack my horse in the barn," Buck said. "Then throw my blankets into the bunkhouse. You got any objections, Barrel?"

"Don't get snooty with me. The boss hire you?"

"He hired me."

"His brake-shoes must be wore out. His brakes is slippin' an' he's gone feeble-minded, I reckon."

The Negro watched them, eyes wide. The Irishman grinned and remained silent. Buck kept his eyes on Barrel MacShane's wide and ugly face.

"Barrel, me an' you got off on the wrong boot back in the café. Now we're both on the same pay-roll an' in the same bunkhouse. What say we shake hands, fella, an' call it quits?"

Buck stuck out his hand.

But Barrel MacShane only eyed the hand truculently. He made no move to shake hands. He said nothing, but his scowl was even deeper. A moment passed, and then Buck let his hand drop. He spoke to the Negro and the Irishman.

"Well, I did my best. Where is my bunk?"

"Ain't got no extra bunk here," MacShane said.

Buck said, "Spider LaMarr told me there was an extra bed in the bunkhouse. Who runs this freight outfit, MacShane—you or Spider LaMarr?"

MacShane had no answer.

The Negro said, "They's an extra bunk, white man. Foller me an' I'll take you to it."

MacShane snarled, "You stay right here, Cotton Top. Your job is to grease this wagon, savvy? Let this gent find his own bunk."

"Yes, suh."

Cotton Top and the Irishman returned to their duties. Buck led his horse back into the compound and tied him to a manger filled with wild hay. He saw it was bluejoint, a native hay, a member of the bluestem family; it made good horse-feed. He unsaddled and put his kak and blanket over the saddle-rack, the blanket over the saddle so it could be exposed to the air and would therefore dry faster. His horse taken care of, he went into the bunkhouse, carrying his slim bedroll. Outside the rain rolled off the sod roof and dripped off the eaves.

Two men, evidently skinnners, were in the long bunkhouse. They sat at a table playing cards, and Buck saw they were playing seven-up. Both looked up, both nodded, and then both returned to their cards. Evidently a new hand was nothing out of the ordinary on Dunlap Stages pay-roll.

"I'm McKee. Buck McKee. Spider LaMarr told me there was a stray bunk back here, men."

One man jerked a thumb toward a bunk. "That one is vacant, McKee. Boy named Hanson had it, but he got itchy feet and drifted into Sonora, across the Mex Border. Done took a miner's wife with him, too."

"Lack of good judgment," Buck joked. "Them Sonora girls are mighty purty, an' a man can have his choice down there."

"We told Hanson thet, but he had his mind set. Okay,

Jiggy, my pot." The man raked in the chips. "Wish to hell this damn' rain would stop. Been rainin' for months, seems like."

"My boots," said Buck, "are ice cold."

"Who's ain't cold?"

A man said, "Ain't you the gent what tangled with Barrel a few minutes back down at the restaurant?"

Buck only nodded.

He sat on his bunk and did some thinking. He seemed to be getting nowhere in a fast hurry. Matt Dunlap, bless her pretty bones, had hired him and Tortilla Joe to find out what was the trouble with Dunlap Stages. Now Tortilla Joe was working for Dunlap Stages' competitor, Western Freight, and he was hired by Dunlap Stages. He only hoped that Matt Dunlap had not written down to Spider LaMarr, telling the lanky man that she was sending down two hands. She had promised to keep her lips and pen silent.

Spider LaMarr entered and said, "So you got located in a bunk, eh, McKee?"

Buck nodded. He jerked a thumb toward the barn. "Better keep that bow-legged bulldog off'n me, boss. I might tangle with him and dent his horns for you."

"Barrel?"

"Yes, Barrel."

LaMarr showed a crooked smile. "You dehorn him, McKee, and you don't break my little heart. Bend your sixer over his skull if you want, or fill him full of lead until he bounces when he hits the sidewalk."

Buck looked up. "You sound like you don't cotton too strong to him."

"I'm runnin' a business, McKee—a freightin' business. This outfit is owned by an old gent up in Wyomin'; name of Dunlap. I have to make it show a profit. Otherwise I'm separated from my four hundred bucks a month job. Where else can I make four hundred bucks per?"

"Good money."

"You look like a good hand to me. You can handle your-

self in a fight, and that is the kind of man I want. You see, things don't set so good here—not since Western Freight moved in some time back."

Buck studied him. "Trouble, LaMarr?"

"Trouble, McKee."

"What kind?"

"Any kind a man desires." Again Spider LaMarr's long and homely face showed a grin. "Stick around an' find out. You take out the Phoenix stage come daylight. Leaves here at four thirty in the mornin'. Be on deck, savvy?"

"I'll handle the ribbons."

Spider LaMarr moved over and watched the card game. Evidently the skimmers engaged in it were off duty. Barrel MacShane ambled in, long arms swinging; he gave Buck a sour look, then spoke to LaMarr. The wagon was ready to roll. The mine messenger had been down, and the Lucky Belle wanted some old machinery hauled to Phoenix, there to be repaired. It would be repaired in the railroad shops there. The mine didn't have the equipment to handle the repair job.

"Get a wagon and some hands up there, Barrel."

"The super said his men would load it."

LaMarr said hurriedly, "Get the wagon up there, fellow."

MacShane waddled away. LaMarr gave the broad back a long and dour glance, and Buck realized all was not well between the superintendent of Dunlap Stages and his assistant. He gave this matter some thought. He decided he would try to drive a bigger wedge between the two.

He lay on his bunk, boots off. The stove had heat and it was only a few feet from his cold feet. He dried his socks while wearing them. He read an old issue of the *Hardrock Miner*, but was not interested in it. He had no interest in mines. A miner, he had long before decided, was second-cousin to a gopher—he was always digging in some hill. He liked the sun and the wind and the smell of cedar and pine, the feel of a horse between his legs, the creak of saddle stirrups. No underground work for one Buck McKee. . . .

LaMarr left the bunkhouse.

Buck lay on his back and made adroit questions. He pried information out of the card players. Journals had broken off wagons, reaches had snapped, and tugs had broken. Other troubles had plagued Dunlap Stages. Now it was down to the point where the Lucky Belle Mine, the bigger of the two mines, was about to cancel the freight contract it held with Dunlap Stages.

"Who is the super at the Lucky Belle?"

"Gent named Jake Jones. Gruff fellow, but fair. Or he seems fair to me, but I don't know nothin' about it, fella. I jes' work here. I'll stay here as long as they kin pay my wages. When the outerfit gits so broke it can't pay my wages I'm driftin' acrost the street. If Ma won't hire me, I'll drift on to some other company. Your play, Gus."

For the first time in days, Buck's feet grew warm. He felt cosy and comfortable, and he must have drifted off to sleep. When he awakened the bunkhouse was getting dark and the card game had broken up. He had a blanket over him. He smiled, for one of the card players had put the blanket on him—a thoughtful gesture. He was as hungry as a healthy man could be.

Then he became aware of another man in the darkened room. The man sat beside the stove and said nothing. Buck could barely make out his features. He kept his thoughts and tongue to himself, for the man was Marshal White.

"You've come awake, eh, McKee?"

"I guess so," Buck said. "Pinch my big toe."

His boots were dry, too. He sat on the bunk and pulled them on. The marshal watched him. Then the lawman said, "Well, gotta make my rounds. So long, mule-skinner. Take it easy."

He walked out, boots making sounds on the plank floor. Buck studied him and did some wondering.

The marshal had not been sitting there just to get warm.

Buck went to the office. Here was an old rolltop desk, the top closed. A Douglas chair stood in front of the desk, and

across the room was a wooden bench. Wooden files lined the south wall. The windows were dirty and streaked by rain and mud. Cobwebs filled corners.

The office was empty. He gingerly tried to open the file-cases. They were locked shut. Each file-drawer had a small key-hole. Buck stood in the door and looked out on Hard-rock's Main Street. People were moving along the plank walks, horses stood at hitch-racks; a rig came down the hill from the mines, horses braced against breeching to hold the buggy. And over all the din and confusion was the pounding sound of the stamp mills on the hill.

He looked at the office of Western Freight.

Tortilla Joe came out of the office, stood for a moment on the sidewalk, and his gaze met Buck's. But if the Mexican knew Buck he gave no indication of that fact. Anyway, Buck could not see recognition in the wide, dark face of his partner. Or was the dusk too dark?

Tortilla Joe turned and went down Main Street.

Buck McKee had a moment of indecision. He didn't like this idea so well now—Tortilla Joe was on the opposite side of the corral fence from him. All the other times they had bunked together and had worked from the same side. But they needed a spy in the midst of Ma Jorgenson's outfit, just like they needed an inside man with Dunlap Stages. So Buck reconciled himself to Fate.

Tortilla Joe turned into the café and became lost from sight in the crowd.

Buck decided to go to the café and eat, too. Get in a few minutes ahead of the six o'clock rush. Outside the rain had died to a drizzle. He decided to wash his face and hands back in the horse-trough and then slick down his hair and go and eat supper. That Elsie was a good-looking girl, and he wanted to look his best.

The waitress was almost as pretty as Nita Jorgenson.

He washed and wet his hair, combing it with an old comb. Barrel MacShane was inspecting a wagon. He walked around it, tapping it with a hardwood club, listening for

possible weak points in the axles and tongue and reach. He looked up under his heavy brows.

Buck looked at the man's wide face. Then he looked at the club. But he said nothing as he brushed off his shirt-front and shrugged his shoulders. Apparently he was openly ignoring the big man.

Barrel MacShane savagely pounded the wagon-tongue right above the point where the double-tree pin went through the tongue. His club made dull sounds that still held a vicious note.

Buck went out the back door.

The alley was muddy and dark. Buildings, crowded together, cut out the daylight, and walking was difficult—you had to step around puddles and you had to keep from slipping. Sheds and outbuildings and the back of commercial establishments abutted the alley, which was just wide enough for a team and wagon to traverse. Tin cans were everywhere, flung out of doors by impatient and careless hands. Buck stepped around a pile of cans and then, behind him, he heard the rush of boots, the swish of clothing.

Swiftly he started to turn.

He did not complete the turn. That was because the club came down and knocked him unconscious. He felt the heavy club hit him on the right side of the head, then it glanced down and smashed into his shoulder. He remembered the club in Barrel MacShane's thick hands, and then darkness held him. When he came to he was lying in the mud, and he still remembered how MacShane had held that club, pounding against the hardwood tongue of the wagon.

He looked up into a face. Gradually his eyes settled, the face stopped shifting, and Buck almost gasped aloud.

For the face belonged to Barrel MacShane!

CHAPTER SIX

"WHAT the hell happened to you, McKee?"

Buck McKee closed his eyes. His head felt like a den of rattlesnakes had moved into his skull for a winter-home and they were crawling over each other. He had a woozy feeling and also some pain. For a moment he almost went unconscious again, but gradually his brain settled, although his head ached.

He kept his eyes closed. Barrel MacShane repeated his question; still Buck did not answer. This didn't make logic. Here he had figured that MacShane had slugged him, and here MacShane was on his knees beside him asking what had happened. If the ape had slugged him, would he have stayed to bring him to?

Buck doubted that. But he had not time for thought—thought was a painful process, and he did not want any more pain. He put his hands behind him in the mud and sat up, shaking his head slowly.

"What buildin' fell on me, Barrel?"

"Somebody slugged you, McKee. I found this note on your *bosom*. Done looks to me like somebody's knocked you out an' then warned you to leave Hardrock. Here's the cardboard, fella."

Because the printing was big, Buck could read it in the duck.

Buck McKee:

Drag yourself outa this town, McKee. Ain't healthy here for you, savvy? Make boot tracks.

The note was unsigned.

"Now who," Buck marvelled, "would want me out of town, Barrel?"

"You got me," MacShane said, shrugging. "I was headin' toward the beanery to fill my gullet with some good chuck when I almost stumbled across your carcass. How long you been cold, an' what do you remember?"

"I started up the alley right after I saw you tappin' that tongue," Buck said. "How long ago was that?"

Evidently the ability to think was a tortuous thing to Barrel MacShane, who canted his ugly head and scowled deeply as his mind started to function. Evidently functioning came slowly to him, for he was some time in debating before he answered, "About ten minutes ago, maybe; maybe not that long. I never looked at no clock, fella."

Buck got to his feet. He had water in his boots, his back was sopping wet, and his hat lay in the mud, flattened on one side. He picked it up and almost fell on his face in the process. Finally he had the Stetson, and he punched it out and re-creased it.

"What do you remember, McKee?"

Now why had Barrel MacShane asked this question? Was he fishing for some information? Had he slugged him and stuck around just to make it look like he had not been guilty of swinging the club that had knocked him cold?

"Don't remember much." Buck still held the crudely-printed sign. "Heard boots behind me, turned—and blotto, out went my kerosene lamps. Next thing I knew I was gazin' up at your purty little face."

"Leave my face outa this, savvy? I don't want you to throw no slurs against my face an' how it looks! It suits me, so t'hell with you who don't like my looks!"

Evidently the formidable appearance of Barrel MacShane's face was a touchy point in the gunman's make-up. Buck almost had to smile, despite the pain in his head. He diverted attention to the cardboard he held.

"What would you say that cardboard is taken from, MacShane?"

"Looks to me like it was part of a paper box," Barrel MacShane said, after giving the cardboard a diligent study.

"Might have come from an ol' box that some shoes has come in."

"Does look like the side of a paper shoebox at that. Well, I wanta thank you, Barrel, for helpin' me."

Barrel MacShane scowled. "Don't thank me, McKee. I didn't do it 'cause I like you. I'd even help my mother-in-law under such circumstances—that is, if I had a mother-in-law, which I ain't got an' which I don't want. Say, how well do you know that Mexican?"

Buck knew he was talking about Tortilla Joe. So he played ignorant with, "What Mexican, MacShane?"

"Thet one what rode into Hardrock with you."

"Oh, that fella. Hell, I jes' met him right afore I met the stage with you an' Spider LaMarr on it—when you danged near scared me outa ten years' growth with your scatter-gun."

"You don't know him well, then?"

"Only as good as I could in ridin' into town with him, which means nothin'. I don't git your point, MacShane."

"He must be an enemy of yours."

"How come you say that?"

MacShane explained. When he had come out of the back door of Dunlap Stages he had seen a man dart between two buildings and disappear from the alley. "An' it was that Mex, McKee. I figure he slugged you an' took it on the run when I opened the back door."

"You sure it was that Mexican?"

"I'm danged sure. Positive, McKee. I got a good look at him afore he disappeared. I'd swear it was him."

Buck had a moment of indecision. Barrel MacShane sounded positive, and Tortilla Joe was a great hand at joking—still, his partner wouldn't consider slugging him a joke. Had that club landed flush on his skull it could have killed him. No, Tortilla Joe had not slugged him.

"I'm goin' jump that Mex," Buck said.

"He's got somethin' to do with this."

Buck said, "I'm going go to the beanery an' get some

chuck. Might not eat much, but a cup of coffee would settle my stomach."

"I could add a nip to it, McKee. Got a bottle under my shirt. LaMarr won't let us take a drink on the job or have likker on the premises, you know." He winked hugely.

"I'll take a snort now, if you don't mind."

Buck had never inhaled liquid fire, but he had an idea it couldn't have been any hotter than the whisky in Barrel MacShane's flask. He almost gasped for air, and he was as glad as could be that the dusk was thick enough to hide his facial expressions. That stuff was so strong that a couple of drinks would sprout horns on a muley cow. But Barrel MacShane drank it like water. Even if he had a rawhide-lined stomach, Buck figured the liquor would make blood-blisters on it.

"Gink here in town has a still," Barrel said. "Makes the strongest whisky I've ever guzzled. What do you think of it, fella?"

"Kinda weak, I think."

Barrel MacShane sent a long look in Buck's direction. "Thet club done addled your taste, McKee. Best git some chuck into you."

They went down the alley, boots sloshing in the mud. Evidently Barrel MacShane held no grudge against him. From all indications it looked like the human ape had buried the hatchet with one Buckshot McKee. Buck didn't know nor did he care; all he wanted to do was keep on living. He had had hangovers, but his toughest wine hangover was a mild headache compared to his head at the present time. Gingerly his fingers went under his hat and explored his scalp. He had a lump that would put a big egg to shame.

"Head still ache, McKee?"

"They're flyin' from one side to the other," Buck said. "Bats, I think, an' mebbe a few hawks and eagles, too. This I can't understand, Barrel. Here I am, a poor inner-cent waddy, an' some gent knocks me colder'n a can of sardines."

"Might've mistook you for somebody else, McKee. This town is full of drifters, an' some of them suck *marijuana*, I believe. When they git full of that Mex dope they'd tie into a whale with a pocket-knife. Might've been some gent what had tangled with you back 'long the trail somewhere. He's seen you in Hardrock an' yo' ain't seen him, so he's laid a hunk of two-by-four acrost your skull."

"That's possible. I'd say an eight-by-eight, though."

"Well, here we are at the beanery."

Ma Jorgenson was in the act of coming through the door when they tried to enter the Hardrock Café. Behind her was Nita. Lamplight shone on the girl, and Buck enjoyed her fresh beauty, even if his head did ache.

"Make way for the Western Freight," Ma Jorgenson said sourly. With her elbow she pushed Buck to one side. She had an elbow as hard as the kick of a young colt. Buck grunted and went against a building. Barrel MacShane had jumped to one side, and Ma's elbow missed him.

"Yep," MacShane grunted, "Western Freight itself, with its two-legged ore-wagon. You're as big as one, Ma."

"Mister, I'll make you eat them words——"

Nita said, sternly, "Mother, don't make a spectacle of yourself, please! You asked for that insult and you got it! People are looking at us."

"Let the scissor-bills look!" Ma Jorgenson put her hands on her hips and looked at Buck McKee. "You look kinda done-in around the gills, McKee. Are you starvin' to death, or is it the bad stink you get from the company you work for?"

"A combination of both. Come on, Barrel."

Nita said, "I'm sorry, Mr. McKee. Ma has been hitting her bottle a little too hard. Come along, mother."

"I got business with these men——"

Barrel MacShane grinned and went into the crowded café, with Buck following. MacShane grunted, "She's a bad case, Ma is. She either likes you or she don't; she ain't got no in-

between. She don't like you 'cause you work for Spider LaMarr."

The place was crowded. Elsie flashed a smile at Buck as she hurried by, arms laden with dishes. Buck had never seen a woman carry so many dishes before. He couldn't navigate across a bunkhouse carrying a filled cup of coffee without spilling some. Yet here she held all those dishes. . . .

"Dunlap Stages ever tangle with Western Freight?" Buck asked innocently. "The two outfits ever git into open warfare?"

"Not yet."

Miners pushed out and more came in. Buck let his gaze run along the counter. There men were perched like buzzards on a corral rail. He saw the broad back of Tortilla Joe. His partner was shovelling a forkful of potatoes down his throat. He had a mouth you could stick a big delicious apple into.

"Hey, there's the Mex, McKee!"

Buck played ignorant. "Where?"

"Over there. He's pulled out of thet alley an' headed this way. Thought you said you'd git him?"

"Not a good place to start a disturbance."

MacShane grinned tightly. "Seems to me you didn't have them fears when you smashed me in the jaw an' knocked me against the wall, McKee. Maybe you've gone chicken-hearted an' you're scared of that Mex, eh?"

Buck did some quick thinking. He had to get in good with MacShane and LaMarr, for he had to work into their confidences. He knew he was in danger, too. Somebody either knew he was working for Matt Dunlap, or somebody at least suspected that—or else why had that unknown person slugged him?

Maybe Barrel MacShane was playing his cards close. Mixed with the big man's stupidity Buck seemed to detect a subtle vein of sly cunning. He remembered MacShane's eyes when he had slammed back against the wall of this café—when Buck's knuckles had smashed against Barrel

MacShane's rock-jaw. Those eyes had held hate—a dull, burning hate, all the more dangerous because of their quiet calmness. These thoughts were with Buck, and they erased out the thought that perhaps somebody knew his real purpose here in this mad boom town.

Surely Matt Dunlap would not tell. To spread word ahead that she was sending in him and Tortilla Joe would mean only trouble for them. And to whom would she write? To Spider LaMarr, of course. But she had promised not to write. Buck had made sure he had extracted this promise from her. No, he had not been slugged because he was in Hardrock because of a certain dangerous mission; he had been slugged because somebody hated him—and the sign pointed toward Barrel MacShane.

Still, there was always leeway for error, and he had best play his cards close to his chest, and play along with MacShane and LaMarr. With this thought uppermost, he came in behind his partner. He hated himself for what he was going to do. Tortilla Joe, head bent over his soup, was sucking loudly; he did not see Buck. Buck raised his right hand and gave the Mexican a hard chop across the neck. Tortilla Joe yelled, dropped his spoon into his soup; Buck felt the hot soup splash and hit his hand. He almost knocked the heavy-set Mexican from his chair.

"What the heck you do, cowboy? You gone loco?"

Buck gritted, "What were you doing in the alley a few minutes ago?"

Tortilla Joe stared at him. He had dull and vacant eyes. He seemed to be looking at a crazy man. "You go the loco," he repeated. "You hit me again and I go for my gon."

Elsie hurried over, took Buck's arm. "No trouble, please, sir."

Buck said, "Watch your step, Mexican," and he followed Barrel MacShane to a rear booth.

MacShane slid into the booth and almost filled it. "You sure scared that Mex," he chuckled. The chuckle sounded like it came from the bottom of a deep rain-barrel. "He's

a coward, jes' like all his kind. Never even offered to fight."

Buck McKee didn't agree, but he didn't say anything. When he had been about twenty, cocksure and tough, he had run across the fists of a young Mexican, and the son of Sonora had beat him to a living pulp. He didn't agree with the theory that all Mexicans were cowards, but why cross this hulk of human meat?

"You must've done that before," MacShane said.

"Done what?"

"Hit with the side of your hand thataway. That's a judo-cut. I learned it from a Jap in 'Frisco. I can break a board hittin' it thataway. Some time I'll show you, McKee."

Tortilla Joe finished eating. He slid off the stool and gave Buck a long, slow look of conjecture. Buck winked. Barrel MacShane, watching the Mexican, did not see the wink.

Suddenly, Tortilla Joe smiled, understanding Buck's wink. It was a wide, boyish smile that took possession of every inch of his wide face. He swaggered out, spurs chiming.

"He must be loco hisself," Barrel MacShane said, shaking his head. "Notice how the goof smiled? Like he had some happy thought an' almost had to laugh at it. He must be crazy."

Buck cocked his head and thought. "By gosh, MacShane! he acted kinda nuts, at that, when we rode into town. Maybe he is crazy, you know. He might've gone off his bean an' slugged me jes' to have somethin' to do!"

"Here comes our soups. Yeah, he might've done that, McKee. Them sons of Chihuahua are all loco, I says. Good soup, eh, McKee?"

The soup tasted fine. "Wonderful," Buck said.

CHAPTER SEVEN

TORTILLA JOE stopped suddenly, for Ma Jorgenson, coming out of the Silver Dollar Saloon, barged into him with a sudden force. For the second time within a few moments surprise etched itself across the Mexican's dark face.

"What the matter with you, Ma? You as loco as that long cow-puncher?——"

Nita had followed her mother out of the saloon. "She's been drinking," the girl said. "Come on, Ma, and go with us to the office, please."

"What'll we do there?"

"You got a bottle cached there, remember."

"I'll go with you. Guess it ain't a good idea for a business woman to get drunk on Main Street, anyway. Look bad for her company."

"You as loco as the long cow-puncher," Tortilla Joe said.

Ma Jorgenson fastened her dull eyes on him. "What cow-puncher, Tortilla Joe?" Her hand was hooked around his forearm in a chummy manner. Nita was on the other side of her mother.

"That Buckshot McKee hombre."

Nita said, "What about Mr. McKee, Tortilla Joe?"

"He came behind me and hit me with the side of his hand like thees." With his free hand the Mexican gestured violently. "I seet een the café an' he comes een with thees man named Barrel an' he ties eento Tortilla Joe. Almost knocked me off my stool, he deed!"

Ma stopped, said, "We'll go back and finish both them lugs."

"No," Nita said, "no."

Tortilla Joe somehow got the impression that this raw-boned, ugly woman was not as drunk as she put on. And

why she should act intoxicated around him was something he couldn't understand. He had been in the alley. He had got a glimpse of the person who had buffaloeed Buck McKee.

He had seen Buck go down, and he had seen the person who had slugged him run away, but the dusk had been too thick for recognition. He had gone to Buck and looked at him, and he had seen that his partner had been unconscious and was not dead. Then the arrival of Barrel MacShane had sent him out of the alley. He was sure Barrel MacShane had seen him. Otherwise Buck would not have jumped him in the Hardrock Café. Buck would not have winked at him. He knew that Buck had got a lift out of hacking him with that judo-cut on the neck. Buck had a habit of sneaking up behind him and smashing him across the back. When he hit him across the back it didn't hurt as much as his neck now hurt. Buck had hit too high.

"We go to office, Ma."

"Why did McKee jump you? 'Cause you work for Western Freight?"

"It was my fault," Tortilla Joe lied. "He go by and I call him bad name. I no like him for some reason. He theenk he too—too——" The Mexican searched for words. "He theenks he ees too beeg for hees breeches!"

"We oughta trim him down to our size," Ma said, and stopped in front of Western Freight's door. But Tortilla Joe and Nita held on to her and almost propelled her into the office. They got her in the swivel chair, her ample seat doing a swell job of covering the wide chair.

"Get her drink," Tortilla Joe said.

Nita dug in a drawer. "Here's her bottle. I don't think she needs more, though, and——"

She stopped, for Tortilla Joe had uncorked the bottle. He drank deeply, his brown Adam's Apple bobbing like a fish-bobber. Finally he lowered the bottle and sighed. "Good wheesky, womens."

Ma asked, "Who's takin' out the Phoenix stage? Ain't that your job, Tortilla Joe? I hired you to run stage."

"Sure, I take heem out."

Nita glanced at the clock. "Time to get the stage out on the street." She looked at her mother, who had her head down and was snoring a little. "I'll show you where the stage is, Tortilla Joe."

"I find heem in barn, no?"

"I'll go with you."

She took his brown, chubby hand and led him out the back door. They were in the compound. Four bays were already harnessed to the stage. A Negro held the lead teams by their bridles.

"You drivin' this, Mistuh Tortilla?"

Nita said, "He's taking it out. You ride with him, Johnny? He doesn't know the road too well."

"He a careful driver?" The Negro rolled his eyes over Tortilla Joe's squatness. "Ah seems to smell likker on his breath."

"Just one snort to accommodate Ma."

Nita still held on to Tortilla Joe's hand. Her grip was nice and the whisky in him was warm and he put his arm around her. He had expected her to move away. Instead, she came closer, and he hugged her tightly, his heart pounding wildly. Johnny grinned and said, "Up we go, Mistuh Tortilla Joseph."

"You check thees rig?"

"Ah done checked it all the way, Mistuh."

Nita said, "Our stages are good ones, Tortilla Joe. Almost all of them are new. They cost us a purty penny, too."

"Can't tell about them rotten Dunlap Stages gents," Tortilla Joe mumbled. He was fishing for information. He had thrown out lines all the time he had been in the employ of Western Freight. So far he had dragged back an empty line. He had learned nothing that would help Matt Dunlap.

"Ah'll help you up, boss."

Johnny helped him on to the box, then climbed up beside him. Marshal White came out of the office and said, "Just a minute, Mexican."

Tortilla Joe, boot on the brake, had the ribbons wound around his hands, and he scowled at the delay and also the way the lawman had said the word *Mexican*. Yet he held his anger under a cloak of good nature.

"You want me to go to jail, no?"

The marshal squinted up at him. "You've been in lots of jails," he said. "You might have even been in the local jail at one time, eh?"

Tortilla Joe had a moment of fear. Eight and one half years was a long time, but this man evidently had a long, long memory. He spat and assumed an air of bravado. "Might have been, had I been in this burg before—but this is my first trip to Hardrock. Somethin' on your min', lawman?"

"That long drink of water you rode into town with—they tell me he jumped you in the café?"

"Si, he jump me."

"Over what?"

"Me, I dunno, *señor*." The Mexican shrugged with great extravagance. "He ees the loco, maybe, no?"

"He must've had a reason."

"He no say what eet was. He jost come behin' me an' blinko—he geeves me the works. Now what on your mind?"

"You want to swear out a warrant for his arrest?"

Tortilla Joe assumed an air of great thought. Inwardly he was laughing. He could get even with Buck by swearing out a warrant for his arrest and getting this lawman to jail his partner!

But that would mean that Buck would go to jail. And the marshal would have records and he would look into those records.

"Forget it, lawmans."

He hollered at the teams, and the four bays pushed against their collars. The stage moved across the compound. There was the smell of horseflesh and of mules, of hay and manure. The seat was solid under him, the ribbons were tight in his grip, and the soil was wet and sloppy. They

skidded around the corner, went up the alley, and then he swung the rig again, making a grandiose stop in front of Western Freight's office and waiting-room.

"All aboard for Phoenix, ladies an' *hombres*. Johnny, you helps the womens get een, 17."

"They kin git in without me."

"You do not work it rights, son. Maybe they geev you the dollaire, no?"

Johnny said, "Never thought of that," and he hopped down and went to work. Passengers filed into the stage. One hand threw baggage back into the boot and latched the flap down.

"All set, driver."

Johnny climbed up, dark face long. "Never made a danged penny. You're a bad one with ideas, Tortilla Joe."

"Better lucks the next time."

Buck McKee and Barrel MacShane had watched passengers load. Now Buck looked up with a satirical, "Hope you have a good trip, Mexican." He added, "No accidents, because you'd be helpless in case of an accident."

"I drive thees stage, you drive yores!"

"Both of you close your big mouths," a man yelled from inside the stage. "Get this animal rolling, driver, and get me out of this sinful burg!"

"He's drunk," Johnny said.

"All aboard?" Tortilla Joe hollered.

Ma Jorgenson stuck her homely head out of her office with, "Git it rollin', Mex. Drag 'em outa town!"

Nita pulled at her mother. Ma spied Buck McKee, and Barrel MacShane and Tortilla Joe heard her holler, "We don't need no advice from you two hellions, an' what is more if you——"

"Mother." Nita dragged Ma back into the office.

Tortilla Joe let the horses hit their collars, and the stage started with a jerk and silenced the drunk. But within a few rods the drunk was singing in a high, falsetto voice that

would grate the varnish off a hardwood table. Tortilla Joe braced his boots on the rod and played his reins. Dusk changed to night and it was all downhill into Phoenix. Johnny hung on to the seat, giving the Mexican advice. The trail was narrow—too narrow in some places—and it was on one of these narrow spots that they met four Dunlap Stages freight-wagons plodding up a grade. As was the rule, the downward-bound vehicle went into siding, and Tortilla Joe was lucky, for he held the inside, and therefore he put his stage close to a cutbank and waited for the teams to go slowly around him. They were pinched for space: to the east the road fell a hundred feet into a canyon, and the mules were tired—slowly the wagons inched up the grade, the drivers cursed Tortilla Joe as they moved—why hadn't he picked a wider spot wherein to meet loaded wagons?

"To hell weeth all of you."

Johnny smiled. "You tell them, Tortilla Joe." He had hold of a long club, his black fingers tight around it. "That outfit has done pushed us aroun' too long. Only Miss Nita has kept us from tanglin' with them Dunlap men."

"*Señorita* Nita? She ees the fiery kind, no?"

"She shuh don't want us to fit them Dunlap men, though."

The last Dunlap wagon inched past them and the road was clear again, and again the four bronses hit collars. Johnny claimed they were about five minutes behind time, and Tortilla Joe made his whip talk. The moon rose and gave out a sickly light, obscured most of the time by low clouds. Rain came down sometimes in hard bunches that beat against them; then it was soft—a miserable drizzle. Here on the high mountains the air got cold and some of the rain changed into snowflakes. Johnny called the turns in the road and Tortilla Joe worked with his teams, coaxing them and jockeying them. His hands were blue with cold and his boots were chilly. At Half-way House he changed teams and his passengers and he and Johnny got loaded with hot coffee. Then passengers climbed in again and one old

woman looked up to say, "Be more careful around those curves, driver."

"She almost lost her false teeth," the drunk cackled.

"He's got a bottle on him," the Negro whispered. "Regulations say that a driver has to take a bottle away from a drunk 'cause nobody on the stage is allowed to drink."

The drunk heard the Negro's low words. He stopped and looked up at them. Lamplight from the windows of Half-way House showed a burly man, thick of torso and of chest. He looked like he would be a rough customer in any kind of a tussle. He said nothing as he glared at them.

"You go onto stage, please?" Tortilla Joe asked.

The drunk smiled. "Okay, driver."

The door slammed. Johnny looked at Tortilla Joe. "He's got a bottle on him. I done seen it under his coat."

"You take it away from him."

They reached Phoenix ten minutes behind schedule. The square-boxed locomotive puffed and sighed, and the passengers left the stage to climb into the passenger coach, with the drunk falling on his face on the car steps. Tortilla Joe and Johnny watched the irate conductor and brakeman get the souse on to his boots. The drunk wobbled into the car and became lost from view.

They changed teams at the barn and got another load of passengers. Johnny timed them to the absolute minute; they left Phoenix on time. The uphill road dragged down their horses, and Tortilla Joe made his whip talk. There would be only one downhill place, and that would be coming down on Half-way House. The moon was brighter, the clouds spun and whirled under a high wind, and the road was a sea of mud, marred by ruts and hoof-tracks.

Johnny huddled with a blanket over his shoulders, letting his body go limp and move with the stage. Down in the stage nobody talked, and Tortilla Joe missed the bellowing conversation with the drunk. Johnny kept grunting, "On time, on time," as he saw landmarks move by; evidently he had this road timed carefully. Tortilla Joe was ice cold, and

he had got gloves back in Phoenix, but his hands were cold even with woollen gloves. He was glad when he saw Half-way House below them in the creek bottom. He said, "Coffee and heat, Johnny."

"Shuh looks good, Cap."

The teams hit the downward drift, and Tortilla Joe let them run. Tugs made noises, wheels sucked mud, steel-shod hoofs kicked back gravel against the stage. They rocked around a curve, and then suddenly the stage lurched sickeningly. Johnny screamed something, and then he was gone—he disappeared from the seat, falling wildly. Only the grip on the reins kept Tortilla Joe on the high seat.

The scene changed suddenly from a peaceful one to one of bedlam. The right front axle of the stage dug savagely into the mud, lurching the stage around; passengers screamed, locked in their prison. Tortilla Joe hollered at his teams, but the broncs were wild; the stage rolled almost over, then lay on its side. Tortilla Joe had leaped free of it, and luckily he still held the reins. Horses reared, plunged against tugs; from somewhere came Johnny, who anchored his weight to the bridles of the lead team, holding them down. From inside the stage came sounds of curses and with these were moans.

"Hold 'em down, Johnny."

"I'll—I'll git them, Tortilla. What happened?"

Tortilla Joe hurriedly unhooked the tugs. Within a moment the horses were freed from the stage. He hurriedly jerked open the door. At first it stuck, but he got it open, and a man's head popped out.

"Sakes alive, driver, what happened?"

"Wheel he come off. Anybody hurt?"

"Some woman down there is hollerin' like she's dyin'."

Johnny led the horses to a tree and tied them. Tortilla Joe helped the passengers out of the stage. One woman swore and said she would sue them. Others said they would sue, too. Tortilla Joe had sense enough to keep his mouth shut. One woman had a broken arm, others were skinned and

bruised. They had heard the wreck at Half-way House, and the proprietor and others came and helped. They got the passengers inside the combined hotel and restaurant. Only Tortilla Joe and Johnny remained behind with the wreckage. The owner of Half-way House said he would get a man on horseback to ride to tell Ma Jorgenson about the wreck.

The man left on the lope, bronc running.

Johnny said, "Axle done sheared off, Tortilla Joe. Down in the mud so a man can't see good."

They got a pry under the stage and moved it upright with great effort. By this time both the Negro and Mexican were sweating with exertion. The axle had broken off and the wheel had rolled into the brush. Johnny brought the wheel back, rolling it ahead of him.

Tortilla Joe said, "Light a match, please, keed."

Johnny lit a match. During its brief flare both inspected the broken stub of the axle. Then the match died and there was only the dim moonlight.

Both were silent for a moment.

Then Tortilla Joe said, "The mud an' gravel he scratch up the end of that broken axle, an' it hard to tell whether or not it has been sawed part way. But it looks to me like a saw worked on eet part ways, no?"

"Me, too. But who did it? Just think, Mistuh Tortilla, them passengers could have got killed."

"How about us? We could've got keeled too, remembers?"

Tortilla Joe cursed with methodical anger. His first ~~tip~~ ^{trip} out and he had got derailed, and now possible law-suits ~~are~~ ^{are} faced Western Freight and—— He thought of Matt Dunlap sleeping in a nice warm bed. He and Buck McKee had been fools. A dollar made a fool out of a man. He'd get Buck and they'd pull out and leave this sorry mess behind. Then he grinned.

He wasn't going to run. He was going to solve this, if it took his last cent and his last bit of strength.

Buck wouldn't run, either.

CHAPTER EIGHT

DAWN was breaking across the Arizona mountains when Buck McKee rolled out of bed. At first he wondered where he was, and then he realized he was in his bunk in the Dunlap Stages' bunkhouse. Rough hands had shaken him awake.

"Time to roll out with your wagon, McKee."

The speaker was Barrel MacShane. Buck pulled on his boots. "Don't you ever sleep, MacShane? When I went to sleep you was playin' cards with the boys."

"After that helped load your wagon with that mine equipment," the ape-like man said. "Got it out in front with the mules harnessed to it an' ready to hit the trail. Then I'll catch me a little bit of shut-eye."

Buck yawned again. "Short night." He went to the window and rubbed some dirt off it and looked out. "Oughta be purty light inside of a half-hour."

"Be light afore thet time, Buck. We're high on the mountains here, an' dawn comes fast at this altitude. You need a guide down the mountain?"

"I can foller the road. Use my brakes when I needs to, and keep them mules back against their breechin's on the downhill slants."

"They're good mules, McKee. Good luck."

Barrel MacShane lowered his bulk with a sigh on a bed that creaked under his enormous weight. He started to pull off his boots. He kicked off his pants and rolled between the blankets and put his broad back toward Buck, who finished dressing. By the time Buck was ready to leave the bunkhouse the big man was snoring. Others hands were snoring too.

Buck went out and entered the compound. Wagons and

other essentials made scraggly outlines in the dawn. A mule stamped in the barn. The heavy Hudson wagon carried some machinery; it had great weight, Buck saw. A roustabout was working around the six-horse team, and he said, "All ready, McKee."

"Wish I could wake up," Buck said.

"They's a jug of hot coffee under the seat. They's a sandwich or two beside it. You can eat at Half-way House."

"I change teams there, too?"

"We got stables and hands and horses and mules there. Well, good luck, fella. Your first trip, eh?"

"Rough road?"

"Oh, could be worse. Soldier's Summit over in Nevada makes this look like a bump on grandma's doughnuts. So does that pass north of here in Colorado. Here's your jerk-line."

"So long."

Buck made his lash talk. He did not hit the mules; he merely made the blacksnake coil and uncoil over their backs, the vicious lash smashing the air. The mules went against collars; the wagon creaked; wheels rolled and groaned. He jerked on the line, made the corner, and he and his rig were going down Main Street.

At this early hour in the morning a normal city or town would have been quiet, its citizens in bed. But Hardrock, Territory of Arizona, was not an ordinary town—some citizens were undoubtedly in bed, many others were awake, though. Lights blazed in all the saloons and there was, of course, a light in the window of Western Freight. And back on the cold-looking dark hill the mills pounded and snarled, knocking metal out of hard ore. And on the streets men and women moved back and forth, some of the miners heading up the hill for the morning shift, others, gamblers and women and drunks, going about their night of pleasure. Buck pulled his sheepskin coat tighter and yawned again.

Although people were on the sidewalks, he met no rigs as he left town. He was about a quarter-mile out of town,

reaching down for the jug of hot coffee, when somebody ran out of the brush that lined the road, darted across the muddy strip, and climbed into his wagon. With surprise he watched the person, seeing he was slim and muscular, and then the person was on the wide seat beside him.

"Hello, Mr. McKee."

Buck uncorked the jug. He was surprised, but he only said, "Howdy, Miss Nita. You make it a habit of ridin' with Dunlap Stages' freight men at this hour of the mornin'?"

She giggled. "What you got in the jug? Whisky?"

"Coffee."

"Oh." She sounded disappointed. She moved closer to him. "I'll take a few drinks of it, if you don't mind."

"Go ahead."

She drank from the jug and then lowered it. Buck watched the ears of the lead team of mules and had his thoughts. She moved still closer to him, and his heart picked up a few beats. She felt soft and warm, despite their heavy clothing. He asked her no more questions. He knew that if he kept silent long enough she would start conversation of her own accord. And this she did within a few rods of travel down the mountain-side.

"I like you, Buck."

"You're about the first woman who has said that since my poor old mother said it, and she's been dead for almost fifty years."

"How old were you when she died?"

"Eleven."

"That makes you sixty-one now. You look young to be sixty-one, Mr. McKee."

She peered at him through the lifting dawn. He looked at her and smiled. She was prettier than ever, he thought.

"I do like you though, Buck."

Buck merely nodded.

They drove for about half a mile. Buck used his brake and the mules, wise to this mountain road and the weather,

braced themselves on steel-shod hoofs, rumps pushing back into breechings to hold the load. The wagon groaned and creaked; mud built up under wheels; then the mud fell off. Buck wondered why she had dodged out of the buck-brush to ride on his wagon, but he again decided he would make her do the talking.

"You're not very talkative," she said.

"What can we talk about? We're almost strangers."

"You could ask me why I bummed a ride with you at this hour of the morning. You know that our Western Freight ain't too peaceful with your outfit, Buck. You could ask me some questions, couldn't you?"

She laughed quietly—a healthy, happy laugh. Buck decided she was a riddle in levis. But then he tempered that assumption with the thought that all women, whether in levis or dresses, were, for the most part, riddles.

"Well, why did you bum a ride with me?"

"Because I wanted to go to Phoenix, that's why."

Buck nodded. "And you could have gone in half the time or less on mama's stage, and yet you got a ride—a slow ride—with one of LaMarr's drivers. That doesn't make how come to this mule-skinner."

"First, I wanted to ride with you."

"Hogwash."

"That's the truth." Dark eyes roved over Buck's face. "I like you. And besides, I didn't want Ma to know I was going to Phoenix."

"Wouldn't she let you go if she knew?"

"Well, now——"

Buck said, "I oughta put you acrost my knee and paddle you, Nita. And I might do it, too."

"Why don't you? I think it would be fun!"

Buck groaned. What an answer! A man never did get to the point where he could understand a woman! "Why don't you want your mother to know you are going to Phoenix?"

"Look, Buck. Ma is drunk—dead drunk. She's in bed.

I get tired of that dinky mountain town. I want to look in some store windows, understand."

"I guess I do," Buck said, and grinned.

He switched the subject to stage-coaches. He had only been in this Hardrock country for a few hours and he had learned exactly nothing. Both Dunlap Stages and Western Freight had had trouble—broken journals, snapped reaches, and other forms of misfortune that cost money and time. Yet no hint of an open warfare between the two outfits had reared its bulky and ugly head. Whoever was doing this work was performing his acts undercover. It seemed odd that this girl—this lovely dark-haired girl—should select him, anything but good-looking, for a riding companion. Had she some other motive for darting from the brush and climbing onto the seat beside him?

If so, what would that motive be? Try to get some information out of him? Was that the reason she wanted to make this cold dawn ride down the mountain with a load of broken-down mining machinery, behind six head of ornery mules?

"You women," Buck said. "You women. . . ."

"Don't you like us?"

"Too much. Now take that Elsie girl in the café——"

Nita's head went in the air. "You *take* her," she said meaningly.

Buck smiled. He put his free arm around her and pulled her close. He had expected her to resist, and he was surprised when she moved into his arm's circle. Her head looked up at him and their eyes met. For a moment, then, the mules were forgotten, and when Buck pulled his head back he knew she had been kissed before. She had had plenty of practice!

"Buck, you old rascal."

Buck said, "Get along, mule." This had happened too fast for him. First thing he knew and he'd be working for Ma Jorgenson's Western Freight . . . and maybe working for nothing because of Nita!

She snuggled close to him.

The dawn changed to daylight that kissed the pine and spruce. Once the mules snorted, and Buck saw a brown bear cross the road about a hundred feet ahead of them. The bear stood on his hind legs, looked at them, then hurried into the buck-brush and became lost from view.

"He's foxy, Buck. Somebody's shot at him."

Buck said, "He's bullet-shy."

They met no rigs in the distance between Hardrock and Half-way House. Nita remarked that this was odd; the Western Freight stage should have met them on its way back from Phoenix.

"Tortilla Joe is driving it."

Buck played ignorant. "Tortilla Joe?"

"The Mexican. The one that rode into town with you."

"Oh, yeah, I just couldn't think for a while. I saw him leave town last night handling the ribbons."

"Something must have happened."

"Here comes a rider."

The man rode like the devil was burning him with a red-hot branding iron. He hollered, "Stage done turned over right out of Half-way House, Nita. I'll head in to tell your mother."

"Ride hard, fellow."

The man was gone then, with his bronc kicking back mud. Nita seemed unworried about the stage, and that seemed odd to Buck McKee. "Now he'll tell Ma he saw me with you and she'll tie into me. Well, I'll put that old hussy back on her haunches with a spade-bit!"

They came down the grade. Buck was worried about Tortilla Joe's safety, but he said nothing. He and the Mexican were supposed to be enemies. The courier had ridden by so swiftly Buck had not had time to question him. They rolled into the compound in front of Half-way House and Buck saw Tortilla Joe standing on the long porch talking to the proprietor.

Nita looked at Tortilla Joe and Johnny. "More tongues

to wag to Ma. Guess I'll not go to Phoenix, Buck. I'll go back with Tortilla Joe."

"Okay."

That seemed odd, too; Buck gave it a moment of thought. She had seemed intent on reaching Phoenix, and now she was going back with Tortilla Joe. Buck called to the proprietor.

"Where is the barn for Dunlap Stages?"

"Behind the café. Drive straight ahead and circle behind the joint."

Buck got to the barn and went down, legs cold and cramped. Dunlap Stages' barn-hands unharnessed his tired teams and Buck went into the café. When he walked past Tortilla Joe he said, "Heard you had some tough luck?"

"Axle busted. Woman broke her arm."

"Tough luck."

He would have asked more questions, but Nita was hanging on to the Mexican's arm. Buck got the impression that she and Tortilla Joe were very friendly. That seemed odd, for Tortilla Joe usually stayed away from women.

Buck ate breakfast and then walked over to inspect the wrecked stage. Repair men had it righted and jacked-up, and were busy putting a new front gear under it. Buck looked at the broken axle.

Odd, that axle should break like that. New axle, good timber—yet it was broken. He studied it carefully for saw-marks. But gravel and mud had rubbed any away, if there had been any marks in the first place.

Tortilla Joe and Nita were at the stage, too. And Tortilla Joe said meaningly. "We don't need Dunlap Stages' men around here, McKee."

"Thanks," Buck said dryly.

His fresh teams were in harness and hooked to his wagon, and he climbed on to the high seat, jerk-line in hand.

"Get along, jassaxes."

When he went by the wrecked stage-coach Tortilla Joe gave him a hard look. Buck decided his partner was a good

actor. He said, "Good-bye, you little beam of twisted sunshine," and Tortilla Joe said, "Good riddance of bad rubbeesh."

Buck made his whip talk, and he smiled. He reached Phoenix just as the passenger train was pulling in. His wagon was being loaded with supplies from the big store, and he was loafing at the depot platform while the roustabouts were loading it. He didn't smile when he saw the smartly dressed woman step from the coach, umbrella in hand. The woman did not see him.

Holy Smoke, he thought. *Now we are in for trouble.*

The woman boarded the Dunlap Stages' stage-coach, lifting her dress high enough to show a pretty leg. She would be in Hardrock before he got there. Buck figured he would be in the mining town by noon. His figuring was wrong—very wrong. He reached there the next morning.

For on Jackpine Hill his wagon broke a reach. He lost part of his load over the grade, and he and a Dunlap Stages' crew worked all that day and the next night before they got the wagon and load into Hardrock.

Buck was dead tired. He fell into bed and slept around the clock. When he wakened Spider LaMarr sat beside his bunk.

"Have a good sleep, Buck?"

"Tired as hell, Spider."

The lanky man was quiet for a long moment. Buck rolled a cigarette and sucked its smoke into his lungs and waited. For some reason he liked this spidery-looking man with the long legs and long arms. He liked Spider LaMarr's slow and deliberate way of talking, the ease and assurance he showed on his job.

"What broke that reach, McKee?"

Buck ground out his cigarette. "You got me stumped there, Spider. It was a new reach, and it sheared off right where the king-pin goes through it. And it shouldn't have busted."

"It dragged in sand and mud and got worn off," the man

said. "If it had been sawed, the sand rubbed off saw-marks. Did you look at the axle on that wrecked Western Freight stage-coach?"

"I did."

"Anything on it—well, did it show anything?"

"Only scarred by rocks and sand when it skidded."

Spider LaMarr stood up and stretched his gaunt height. Buck's eyes followed the man's thin, ugly face.

"This has got me up a stump."

"In what way, LaMarr?"

- "I've given orders—strict orders—for my men not to molest Western Freight in any way. I know Ma Jorgenson rather well. She's been in this freight business for a long time. This is about my thirtieth year as a freighter."

Buck waited.

"I don't think Ma has ordered any of her men to tamper with Dunlap Stages' equipment."

"Maybe nobody is tamperin'? Maybe it is all bad luck?"

"Luck don't get that bad, McKee."

A big shadow moved into the doorway. Behind it came the hulking figure of Barrel MacShane, who stopped in the doorway and listened.

"How about the mines?" Buck asked. "Anybody up there that could profit by getting control of the freight and passenger business from Dunlap Stages and Western Freight?"

LaMarr seemed in a talkative mood. "This freightin' business is a good business here. We should net around six thousand this year for the Dunlaps. But we won't do it with these needless expenses caused by late schedules and repairs. While it is a good business, it isn't big enough to be wanted by either of the mines—they're big corporations, and neither would fool with a little thing like a stage-line."

"I dunno about that," Barrel MacShane grunted.

Spider LaMarr paid his straw-boss no heed. "This has got me run up a pine tree," he said, and left, with Barrel Mac-

Shane swinging in behind him. Buck heard the two walk away, and he rolled another cigarette.

He lay on his back. LaMarr seemed honest. Ma Jorgenson also seemed honest. Both had good reputations back along the freight- and passenger-line business, Buck knew. Matt Dunlap had told him that in Denver. She had carefully investigated all angles before contacting him and Tortilla Joe.

Buck did more thinking.

Back in his mind nebulous points, once meaningless and without stature, were beginning to group themselves in an effort to get form and structure. They fought for clarification; the time, though, was not ripe.

Soon he had another visitor.

Marshal White looked at him with level eyes. He took a chair and sat and looked at Buck, who finally asked, "You still figure you seen me before, eh?"

"I do."

"Where, and when?"

"That's my business. Now tell me all you can about your wreck and the wreck of the stage-coach."

"You're town marshal," Buck said pointedly. "Your jurisdiction ends at the city limits, don't it?"

"You're mistaken there. I'm also a special deputy working out of Phoenix, the county seat. Don't jump to conclusions, McKee."

Buck felt a little angry. He lay on his back and blew smoke. He told the lawman what he knew, and all the time White had his cold eyes on him. When Buck had finished there was a short silence, broken at length by White.

"That all, McKee?"

"That's it, Marshal."

"Any trace of sabotage?"

Buck played ignorant. "What is that?"

"Did it look like the reach or the axle had been tampered with?"

"Oh." Buck reflected. "Not that I could see."

White rose, still looking at him. "Thanks." He walked out—a tall, straight man. Buck looked at the dirty ceiling.

He remembered the records he had stolen from Marshal White's office and had buried under the floor of the shed. White had probably moved everything in his office in an effort to find those records. Buck wondered if any other record of the arrest were in file. That worried him. Maybe the justice of the peace who had sentenced him and Tortilla Joe had a record in his office?

He had made inquiries: that justice of the peace was dead. A fire had ravaged his home after his death. Maybe the records had burned in the fire? Buck gave this thought, and came to the conclusion the only record recording the arrest and conviction was the volume he had buried. Had there been another recording of the proceedings, surely Marshal White would have procured it by now. . . .

Buck blew smoke upward.

Suddenly he grimaced.

For the grey Bull Durham smoke had coiled and uncoiled, and it seemed momentarily to form the face of a woman—a lovely feminine face. Buck remembered the woman who had stepped off the train in Phoenix. She had crossed the platform and had boarded the stage for Hardrock. That meant, then, she was somewhere in this mining town.

Buck groaned inwardly.

CHAPTER NINE

BUCK sat in a room on the second floor over the Broken Lily Saloon. A woman's dressing-bureau stood against the far wall, the floor sported a carpet, and a bed had a gaudy spread on it—blue and orange and yellow. Buck listened to the din that seeped upward through the floor-boards. Whoever owned the Broken Lily owned a gold mine. The joint was packed any hour of the day or night.

Head in his hands, he gazed moodily at the floor. He was sitting like that when Tortilla Joe entered.

"Sit down," Buck said.

The obese Mexican said, "You no even say *hello* to old friend, no?"

"Sit down." Buck spoke sourly.

Tortilla Joe tested the spindly chair gingerly as he lowered his heavy bulk down. It held, but he did not trust it too well. He looked at Buck, who still stared at the floor.

"What down there, Buckshot?"

"A saloon and dance-hall."

"I mean *on the floor*."

"A carpet," Buck growled.

Tortilla Joe grinned and shrugged. He spoke to the world in general. "He no want to talks to me." He looked back at Buck. "Ma Jorgenson she have law-suits from passengers een the wrecked stage. She mad as hen that has got caught in the rain. Ah, that Nita—what a sweet *muchachita*, she ees!"

"She's easy to hug and kiss."

Tortilla Joe's brown, doggish eyes settled on him thoughtfully. "What you mean by that statement, Buckshot?"

"Just what I said. You think that axle was sawed off part-ways?"

"Me? Yo theenk so."

"Talk English not Mexican. You don't say *Yo*, it's *I*."

"Me, sometimes I forgets, Buck. Somebody they ees work against both these stage outfits, or one works against the other. Maybe it is the last, no?"

Buck reached for the makin's. "I dunno for sure, Tortilla. I got about a million suspicions myself; sometimes I suspect a gink named Buck McKee." He smiled at his partner, his grouch gone. "How come you come up to this room too?"

"I see her down on dance-floor. She give me sign, an' I come over, and she say thees ees her room."

"I don't understand her," Buck said.

"Who understands even hisself?"

"Don't get philosophical on me. Here comes somebody down the hall now."

They listened. A woman and a man came, went past the closed door, and turned into another door. The man had been giggling and the girl had been giggling. Buck turned sour again, and again regarded the floor.

Tortilla Joe said nothing.

Ten minutes passed, and then Tortilla Joe said, "A woman she ees come thees way. I can hear her."

High heels came down the hall, stopped in front of the door. A woman came in—and Buck stared in wonder. She wore a short skirt and a blouse that revealed things. She wore silk stockings and high-heeled shoes.

"Hello, boys. Pardon me for being late. I had a customer and he wanted to follow me to my room. I guess that'll be one of the perils of my new trade."

Buck shook his head. "Gee, what would old Hank say, Matilda."

She scowled at the word *Matilda*. "I'm Matt Watson here," she said. She sat down and crossed one pretty leg over the other and lit a tailor-made cigarette. "I got tired of sitting in Denver waiting for reports from you two boys, so I came along on the stage. Old Hank is still sick and flat on his back. His boy writes from college for money, as

usual. I thought I'd go out for a fling to break the monotony."

Buck looked at her slim ankles. "You're breakin' it," he admitted. "How come you get a job as a dance-hall gal?"

"Always did think it would be an interesting job."

"The boys they are already the loco over you, Matt," Tortilla Joe said, peeling the wrapper off a *tortilla* he had taken from his coat pocket. His white teeth sank into the *tortilla* with a crunching sound. "You're the prettiest girl in the saloon, they tell me!"

"How come you get a job in this saloon?" Buck wanted to know.

The explanation had been simple. The proprietor of the Broken Lily had seen her alight from the stage and had mistaken her for a dance-hall girl who had worked for him in other boom towns. The mistake had been rectified with some laughter, and then the idea had hit her that the saloon would be an ideal spot in which to be located. "You can hear lots of talk in here, men, and some of it might add up to something. Who is that big oaf who works for Dunlap Stages?"

"She must mean Barrel MacShane," Buck said, looking at Tortilla Joe.

"Si, the Barrel. What about heem?"

"He's already tried to shine up to me."

Buck grinned. "He get his hands on you, Matilda, and you'll figger you're waltzin' with a grizzly. What else do you know?"

"Nothing. What do you two know?"

They had to confess they knew very little. Of course, they had not been in Hardrock long, and to this she nodded. Buck told about being slugged in the alley. Tortilla Joe told about catching a glimpse of the man who had slugged him, but he had been unable to see the man clearly. He described the man somewhat limitedly, and both Buck and Matt Dunlap learned nothing from this.

"Sometimes back in my head the thoughts they come and

go, an' they want to tell me who the *hombre* was, but they do not say nothin's."

"Very clear," Buck said satirically.

Matt got to her feet. "Well, we'll all work together, and on the surface you two will be enemies, is that right?"

"Correct," Tortilla Joe said.

Matt showed a pretty smile. "I have to go to work. I'm a working girl now, you know. I guess I've drunk a gallon of coloured water. How do I look from the back?" She stood on tiptoe and let them look at her back. Buck again decided she had a very nice looking back.

"Awfuls," Tortilla Joe said.

Buck said, "Terrible."

She stuck out her tongue and leff. They sat in silence and listened to the din below them. A .45 started talking and it shot three times, and then another series of shots sounded. Then the din went down a little.

"A pistol," Buck said. "Then a rifle. Wonder who got killed?"

"Makes no differences, Buckshot. Somebody else is raisin' a son to take the gink's place, no?"

Buck spoke wearily. "I reckon so." He didn't want to talk philosophy. He switched the subject around to stage-coaches and freight-wagons. He wanted to leave Hardrock. He was no hand to stick around a town. He was a rangerman, a cowboy—he wanted to work cattle again. He had been off a horse's back for a few days, and he wanted to get back into his saddle. To this Tortilla Joe bit into his *tortilla* and agreed. But who was causing the damage at Dunlap Stages?

"And at Western Freight, too?"

They went over a mental list of suspects and talked about each one to some length. Somebody wanted to break Dunlap Stages and get the freight- and stage-business. They worked from this premise. By all logical thinking, Western Freight would be the outfit that wanted to break Dunlap Stages—Western Freight would win through collapse of its

competitor. Yet somebody had apparently sawed through the axle of the stage-coach, and the stage belonged to Ma Jorgenson's outfit.

"That don't make sense, Buckshot, no?"

"How about the mines?" Buck asked. "Maybe somebody up there—some bigshot—wants to corral the freightin' an' passenger business and start a stage an' freight outfit for hisself?"

"That might be so. But me, I am the Mexican, an' if I go up there to the office—— They want to put me to work weeth the peeck an' the shovel, an' you know how me an' the work get along——"

"You two is divorced," Buck said, grinning. "I'll check with the mines."

"How?"

Buck shrugged. "I dunno yet, Tortilla Joe. But I'll get some information, if possible. Matt Dunlap claimed that her stage company had the biggest contracts from the mines. I doubt that. I've seen some of the loads Western Freight has pulled in for them mines. Lotsa tons of freight."

"What you theenk of the long geenk, Spider LaMarr?"

"I don't know. Sometimes I think he's honest; then I have other thoughts. All we can do is sit tight and use what little brains the Lord gave us!"

"And our gons, too."

"Yes, our guns."

Tortilla Joe grinned. "Matt, she look purty in her outfit, no? What would ol' Hank he say if he could see her! He would break the blood-vessel in madness, he would; he would choke."

Buck had to smile, too. "He sure would."

Tortilla Joe left first. They did not leave together because if somebody saw them, that person might get word to either Ma Jorgenson or Spider LaMarr. This way, when Tortilla Joe went down the stairs leading into the saloon, people would think he had just been nosing around upstairs. Buck went down the back stairway later on. But first he sat and

did some more thinking. He didn't like to think, either. Thinking was hard work.

And this time it got him nowhere. He went around and around like a coyote pup chasing his bushy tail. He waited ten minutes, and then went toward the back stairs that led down into the alley. There a guard stopped him. Evidently this place had guards all over. Buck hardly blamed the proprietor, for the owner took in a lot of money each day. There was money in this town, and it was being spent across barns and in honky-tonks.

Buck said, "McKee is the name. I labour for Dunlap Stages."

"I've seen you around. Go ahead, fellow. But why use the back stairs?"

"I got reasons."

The guard winked and Buck returned the wink. Some of the girls evidently entertained men in their rooms, and Buck had given the impression he wanted nobody to know he had been upstairs over this dive. Again he thought of old Hank Dunlap. Hank would really break a blood-vessel if he found out his young wife had turned dance-hall girl. He sure would!

He went down the back stairway into an alley thick with dusk. He headed for the back entrance to the barn that belonged to Dunlap Stages. His meeting with Matt Dunlap, alias Matt Watson, had netted him very little; nothing substantial had been learned from Tortilla Joe, either.

Suddenly he saw a man duck between two buildings about half a block away. Buck couldn't see him clearly, but he did catch the lift and rise of the man's pistol. And red flame shot from the gun toward him.

Buck was already crouched, gun leaving holster.

CHAPTER TEN

WHEN guns snarl, you don't know where the bullets land unless one happens to hit you. Twice the gun roared, and then the man was gone. Buck was on one knee, pistol lifted; four times the heavy .45 had reared and coughed its smoky death. He had not had a clear target at any time. The dusk was against him, obscuring his vision; the black powder he shot made much smoke, and this also made for difficult sight. Suddenly the gun up ahead stopped talking.

Buck ran to his right, ducking in between two buildings. He did not know whether he had shot the man or not. Perhaps he had downed him and he now lay between the buildings in his hiding-place? Buck crammed fresh cartridges into his hot cylinder and ran out on the main street, intending to circle around and come in from behind.

He almost ran into Marshal White.

"Why the gun, McKee. You doin' that shootin' back there?"

Buck panted, "Gent ambushed me! I might've got him!" He had no time for conversation. Gun dangling, he ran ahead, the lawman following him. People stopped and stared; a few followed. Ma Jorgenson was one of the followers. She had come out of the office of Western Freight, and she carried a .45.

"What's the shootin' about, marshal?"

"Dunno all of it, Ma. McKee claims he walked into a ambush——"

"Come on," Ma growled.

Buck swung around a building and stopped. No body lay behind the out-thrust of the building's corner: he had missed. Regret ran through him, and he realized he did not even know who had shot at him. He looked at the log build-

ing. His bullets had ripped into the fresh pine logs and had driven the ambusher away. He got to his knees and searched the ground for signs of blood. He was on his knees when Marshal White and Ma Jorgenson arrived, some townsmen and women following them.

"What's the matter, McKee?" Ma hollered. "Sayin' your prayers?"

Buck said, "You got a big mouth, woman!" He got to his feet and dubbed the mud from his knees. Suddenly he was tired of the rain and mud. "Damn this damned rain!" He looked at White. "He hid behind this corner. My bullets came close, but I can't see any blood on the ground."

The lawman looked at the bullet-scars on the wall. "You sure tore up the logs, McKee," he allowed. "You're a mystery to me, man. First, somebody slugs you, warns you to leave town; now an ambusher opens up on you. Why don't they want you in Hardrock, McKee?"

"I sure don't savvy this."

Ma Jorgenson said, "Somebody is sure out to nail your hide to the fence, McKee. You sure it ain't that Mex you crossed the first day you was in town—thet Tortilla Joe fella thet works for me?"

"If it is him he'd best load his gun again," Buck said savagely. "I'll check with that boy . . . unless he's suddenly decided to leave town."

"Lissen," the marshal said suddenly.

For from across town came the sudden roar of guns. Buck listened and thought, "Two guns talking, both short-guns." The sound came from the alley behind the Western Freight office, it seemed. Buck waited no longer. With long strides he ran across the main street, ducked through the crowd, and hurried between two buildings until he came to the alley. Behind him a pace ran the marshal, and behind the marshal hurried Ma Jorgenson, breathing like a wind-broken horse. From somewhere Nita and Barrel MacShane came to join the procession.

Buck stopped, and the rest halted beside him.

Tortilla Joe was down in the mud. He lay on his back, arms spread out; his head was bare, his hat having fallen free and lying a few feet away. His .45 was beside his outflung right hand, snout buried in the mud.

"The Mexican," Ma Jorgenson grunted.

Buck was beside his partner, one knee in a rain-puddle. Fear was with him, but he tried to keep this from his face as he found Tortilla Joe's pulse. The dark broad face was still and the mouth slack. Finally Buck located a heart beat.

"He's done shot acrost the skull," Barrel MacShane grunted. "Looks to me like he's only knocked cold."

Ma Jorgenson was kneeling, too. "He's breathin', people. He must've got creased acrost the haid by a bullet."

Even Barrel MacShane was on his knees. For some reason he seemed to be panting very hard for such a short run. Buck noticed this, but blamed it on the man's weight. Barrel had a lot of meat to carry through the slippery mud.

"Here comes the doc," Nita said.

The doctor was a short, heavy-set old man. He dug into his bag, and Buck noticed he carried a whisky-flask there. He smelled of whisky, too—in fact, he reeked of it. He said to Nita, "Get my bottle out of my grip, girl."

Nita got the bottle and uncorked it.

But the doctor did not give Tortilla Joe a drink. He raised the bottle and drank deeply.

"Now I can get to work."

Soon he had the Mexican sitting upright. Tortilla Joe blinked his eyes, looked up at them, and said, "My head, she ees ache. What happened?"

"You got creased acrost the skull," Buck said. "You got in a gun-fight, remember?"

The Latin frowned fiercely. "Oh, yes, I remember. Fellow he start shootin' at me, an' for why I don't know. . . . I shoot back, I remember—then she gets dark like the mid-night."

"Who shot at you?" Marshal White wanted to know.

"How would I know! Me, I hear the bullets across town, an' I start that way—and boom from a window in a shed comes a gon! My head she ees ache!"

"It'll ache for some time," the medico said. "I hate to waste whisky, but I'm going to wash your wound with liquor. Stand still and quit jumping!"

"She ees burn my head!"

Despite the gravity of the situation, Buck had to smile. The doc doled out the whisky like it was liquid gold. Tortilla Joe had been lucky, just as he had been lucky. One thing was certain, and the clarity of it registered on Buck. Somebody evidently knew he and Tortilla Joe were partners and were working together, even though in opposite camps. For both of them had been shot at within a few minutes apart.

This didn't make logic. Matt Dunlap claimed she had told nobody at the Dunlap Stages office that she was sending down two men. By all tokens nobody but they and Matt Dunlap should know their mission here in Hardrock.

Buck felt a hand steal into his, and he looked down at Nita Jorgenson's lovely face. Her dark eyes met his with brazen boldness.

"I don't understand this, Buck," she murmured. "Somebody shot at you and then somebody wounded our hand here. And you didn't see who shot at you at all? You couldn't recognize him?"

"No."

"That's too bad." She squeezed his hand meaningly. "I'm glad you didn't get hurt. This is certainly a riddle to me."

There was quite a crowd around them. Spider LaMarr stood beside Buck. Ma Jorgenson was watching Spider with the apt and suspicious look a cat holds for a big terrier. Barrel MacShane stood with his huge head canted to one side, hand to his mouth as he watched, his heavy eyes swivelling in their sockets. Then his eyes settled on Nita, and he wet his lips.

Tortilla Joe said, "I all right now. I go to my bunk in the bunkhouse."

"I want to talk to you later," Marshal White said.

"You talk to Tortilla Joe? What we talks about?"

"Routine matter."

Tortilla Joe nodded. Buck wondered if the Mexican knew what the word "routine" meant. Marshal White now spoke to Buck. "I'll talk to you later too. Just now I aim to look for sign back in the alley where the gent shot at you. There's somethin' damn' odd here, an' I aim to git to the bottom of it."

"Hope you do," Buck encouraged. "I'd like to know what it is all about too. I'll be in the bunkhouse, marshal."

Nita said, "I'll help you, Tortilla." She took Tortilla Joe by one elbow, and huge Ma Jorgenson got hold of the other elbow. Buck noticed that his partner listed toward Nita and away from Ma, and he smiled. Nita was plainly playing-up to both him and Tortilla Joe.

And why?

When they went past the Broken Lily Saloon quite a crowd of onlookers were assembled there. Matt Dunlap stepped out and put her hand on Spider LaMarr's arm. "What happened, Mr. LaMarr?"

"Shootin' scrape of some kind. Somebody shot at my skinner here, McKee, while he was back in the alley."

"One of the Jorgenson hands?"

"No, nobody knows. Gent beat an escape, McKee tells us. Then somebody shot this Mex that works for Jorgenson. Creased him an' knocked him out. He's got a skull that's made out of steel."

"Did the same gunman shoot them both?"

Matt's eyes roved over Buck, then back to Spider. Buck noticed that she did not let her hand drop from Spider LaMarr's arm. The gaunt man talked in his usual slow and halting manner. Buck hadn't seen who had shot at him, and Tortilla Joe had been downed from ambush.

"What?—I don't understand!"

"You ain't got us beat, then," Buck said. "We don't savvy it either. If it was a Jorgenson hand who shot at me, why would he also shoot at Tortilla Joe, who works for Ma Jorgenson—or mebbe it wasn't the same gink who shot at both of us." He shrugged. "Too much headwork for me. I'm headin' for the bunkhouse."

Matt finally let her hand drop. But the gesture was accomplished slowly. Her blue eyes seemed riveted to the eyes of Spider LaMarr. She was an attractive figure, for she didn't have too much clothing, and what she had displayed feminine charms somewhat boldly. Spider LaMarr could not help but notice these charms, too.

They went down the street. Barrel MacShane rolled along, a human barrel on legs, his long arms reaching down. "She sure is mighty fine looker, that new jane. I could go for her myself."

"She wouldn't look at your mug," Spider LaMarr growled. "You'd scare a hungry dog off'n a garbage wagon."

"She seemed to go for you," Buck put in.

"She sure did," Spider LaMarr said. "Her name is Matt Watson. How come she know you, McKee?"

Buck said he had been drinking in the saloon and had struck up a conversation with her. She was a right nice girl, he said, and he wondered how anybody so nice would work in a saloon.

"She ain't a regular saloon-gal," Spider LaMarr defended. "She's just a common girl what sees an easy way to make a livin', an' I don't blame her. She drinks tea an' coloured water an' gits a cut out of the likker drunk by the men. Beats slingin' hash in some hash joint."

"Bet it does," Buck agreed.

Barrel MacShane said, "All right, McKee, come on and tell us who shot at you. We're all together in this, you know—one for all and all for one, like the sayin' goes. All this trouble ain't hit Dunlap Stages by accident. Somebody is behind them accidents, an' signs point to the Jorgenson

spread. Me, I don't figger the same gent creased thet Mex what shot at you. One of them Jorgenson gents took a shot at you—fact is, I wouldn't put it beyond ol' Ma herself."

"Who shot at you?" Spider LaMarr asked. "You'd naturally keep it from that pesky marshal. A man handles his own revenge, a man doesn't let the Law handle his problems."

Buck looked at the long and homely face of Spider LaMarr. Watery dull eyes met his, and the man's thin lips were opened slightly. He looked honest and straight. Buck looked at Barrel MacShane. The man's round, ugly face looked sincere, the man's eyes were clear and steadfast; he, too, looked honest and sincere.

"I'll tell you, gents, I don't know. I never got a good look at him. Fact is, I got hardly any look at all, it happened so fast."

"Too bad," Spider LaMarr murmured.

Barrel MacShane sucked in a deep breath. His chest cavity lifted and fell. "Sure is, McKee. I'd like to catch some of them Jorgenson men doin' some deviltry to one of our men or one of our wagons. I'd fix the dirty son." And he made a twisting motion with his huge hands.

"Maybe the Jorgensons ain't behind our trouble," LaMarr said.

Barrel MacShane stared at his boss. "Spider, you talk plumb loco. If they ain't behind it who is?"

"I don't know. But I can tell you this one thing, and it ain't two—never have I ordered any hell done by any of our hands to the Jorgenson women's outfit. This is a mystery to me, too."

Buck said, "I'd sure cotton to know who shot at me. An' I'd still like to know who buffaloeed me back in that alley and left that sign on me."

Spider LaMarr said, "It'll all come out, McKee. Now catch some shut-eye and go out with the four in the mornin' freight. More minin' machinery bein' carried into Phoenix

for repair work. Load it on the train there and ship it to Los Angeles to the foundry there."

Buck said, "I'll be there, boss."

He ate at the Hardrock Café, chatted with Elsie for a while, and then headed to the bunkhouse. A couple of skimmers played their endless game of cards. He piled into bed completely dressed. He laced his hands behind his head and did some thinking. There were clues, he had ideas; they shifted, moved, tried to align themselves. But they were not successful.

The next thing he knew, Barrel MacShane was shaking him. The bunkhouse had a dim kerosene lamp in the far end. The card-players were in bed.

"It's time, Buck," Barrel MacShane said huskily.

Buck yawned. "The hours at night only have about thirty minutes, it seems like. Well, such is the lot of the poor."

"We cain't all be rich."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

WHILE they loaded the machine, Buck had a talk with the manager of the mine. He was a short and heavy man who talked in quick monosyllables. Buck turned the topic of conversation around to the trouble both of the freight-lines had met. The manager said they had both better settle down, or else he would start a freight line of his own and do his own hauling.

"I'm tired of this bickering and fighting between them. We've lost money due to their trouble, Mr. McKee. We've had shipments come in late, some have been damaged in wrecks, and it has cost us money. We're here to make money, not to lose money. I was talking with the manager of our neighbour mine yesterday about this matter. He is of the same frame of mind as I am. If this doesn't stop we go together and do our own freighting."

"Who's behind all this trouble, sir?"

"I don't know. I don't care. But unless this situation clarifies itself we shall be forced to do our own freighting. And we don't want to do that, Mr. McKee. We're here to mine ore, not to freight in equipment and supplies. There's a rumour around that perhaps my outfit and that of my fellow mine superintendent are behind this to corral the hauling end of this deal. That is false—a downright unmitigated lie, and nothing more!"

Barrel MacShane's big head came in the door. Lamplight showed on the huge creases in his ugly face.

"We're loaded, McKee."

Buck inspected the chains that held the heavy machinery to the wagon-bed. They were jacked down tightly and the load was secure. The downgrade from the mine to Hard-rock was a stiff slant; his mules laid back against breechings;

they dug in slim feet and held the load. Buck stopped in front of the Hardrock Café. Dawn was creeping across this lonely land of pine and spruce and fir, lighting the three peaks to the west with magic fingers.

"Gonna get a cup of coffee," he told Barrel MacShane.

"I need one, too. We got time. Best it gets a little more lighter afore we mosey on down the grade."

"You goin' with me?"

"All the way, McKee. Boss's orders. If something happens you'll need a hand to help you."

Buck had carefully inspected the wagon and its running-gear. He had gone over the harnesses carefully and had selected the tie-down chains with meticulous care—going over the chains link by link.

"Nothing can happen, Barrel."

"Boss's orders, Buck."

They had three cups of scalding hot coffee. While they were drinking, Matt Dunlap, alias Matt Watson, came into the café, Spider LaMarr behind her. She had on a dress and a coat, and she shivered as she slid on to a stool beside Buck.

"Sure chilly here at this high altitude. This girl should've stayed in 'Frisco, where the climate fits her clothes."

Spider LaMarr had taken a stool beside Matt. He looked blue and pinched from the chill, and he rubbed bony hands together with a metallic sound. "What'll you have, Matt?"

"Breakfast, Spider."

"Name it, child." Spider had the best-looking woman in the Broken Lily beside him. Spider was grandiose and a spendthrift. Buck almost had to smile. Some day Spider LaMarr would have to find out that this dance-hall girl was really his boss. Spider was due for a rough, rough shock.

Buck paid, said, "Time we drift."

"That time," Barrel MacShane said.

Spider LaMarr swivelled his hammer-head around on its stove-pipe neck. "No wrecks, skimmers—this time, no wreck, savvy?"

Matt Dunlap laughed. "How can they help it if your broken-down equipment falls apart on the road, Spider?"

"It ain't broken-down——"

Buck heard no more. He and Barrel climbed on to the high seat. He got the jerk-line and released the brake.

"Hit them collars, mules!"

The trip into Phoenix was uneventful. Downgrade except for the piece in front of Half-way House, it required mainly that the mules lay back against their breechings and hold the load with the aid of the brake. On Shomach Hill they rough-locked the wheels with the chains, the knots going at the bottom of the wheels to drag in the mud and act as brakes. But the mud was soft; the chain-knots skidded and did little good. They came down the last hill, and the valley lay below them, with Phoenix in the distance. As they wound downward the rain stopped, became a mist, and when they got to the depot platform in Phoenix the sun was shining.

Buck said, "I'm sure tired of this rain, Barrel."

"This sun sure feels good."

It was about ten in the morning. They had a quick drink at the Broken Wheel, ate dinner at the Brown Dog Café, and then, their rig unloaded, they changed teams at the Dunlap Stages' barn, and roustabouts reloaded the wagon with machinery going to the mine. Carefully Buck inspected the chains again.

Barrel said, "Same chains that brought the load down, McKee. All good chains."

"Can't be too sure."

Then the upward climb began. At about three thousand feet altitude they met the rain again, and they had to don rain-coats and rain-hats. Mules plodded upward, digging with shod hoofs into the slippery footing. Occasionally they drew out on side-tracks to rest their stock. Rocks were pushed behind wheels to hold the load; mules went slack against tugs and rested. They met the Dunlap Stages stage-coach; the driver lifted his hand; the stage rocked by. They met the Western Freight stage-coach, too—the driver said

nothing, his cold face made of wood. Finally they topped the ridge below Half-way House and started the downward grade. The mules, sensing the end of their trip, showed renewed energy.

Buck was cold, hands frozen despite heavy mittens. Barrel MacShane sat hunched over, a hunk of meat in an oilskin slicker. Buck's boots were packed with ice. He remembered the sunshine down in Phoenix. He found himself thinking of Charlie's Place, down in Old Messilla, north of El Paso. Down on the Rio Grande River, where the sun shone continuously and in the distance a man could see the blue-tipped mountains rising out of the desert.

He found himself wishing that he and Tortilla Joe were in Charlie's, boots on the rail, drinking *tequila*. After this was over they'd head south into New Mexico Territory. He thought of old Hank Dunlap, sick in bed up in cold Wyoming, and he thought of Matt Dunlap, parading as a dance-hall harpy. Matt laughed and joked about her present "job", but Buck knew the woman had pride—a driving, stiff pride—and the joking and laughter were only on the surface.

He had money in his pocket—more money than he had had for some years—and he had more coming. But what was money when a man was cold in the boots, when he didn't like the job he had, or the location he was in? When this was over, he and his pard would head south-east for Old Messilla.

When would this job be finished?

That was the poser. He hoped he would find a clue soon, and that this could be brought to a finish.

While the stable-crew changed the mules he and Barrel MacShane ate dinner. The big man seemed to have either forgotten or he had forgiven Buck for clipping him in the jaw in the Hardrock Café. He seemed genial enough, and he seemed to find in Buck a companion. He made conversation and joked and laughed. Buck wondered if he had not started off on the wrong foot in his relationship with Barrel

MacShane. But, if he had, MacShane had apparently overlooked it.

"There comes Western Freight's stage-coach," Barrel grunted. "Second one this morning; that outfit must have a lot of passenger trade. That Mix friend of yours is handlin' the lines."

"No friend of mine."

The stage's occupants trooped in for dinner. Buck and Barrel MacShane met Tortilla Joe, who came in behind his passengers. Buck said sardonically, "Think you can make it to Phoenix, fella?" and Tortilla Joe stopped, fists doubled. He was playing his part well, Buck saw.

"You talk to me, skinner?"

"Yeah, to you."

"I'll lay you in the aisle!"

Buck put on an air of wounded mockery. "After I pick you outa the alley—you talk to me like this—it breaks my heart——"

"Come on," growled Barrel. "No use wastin' time with this gent, McKee." He got Buck's arm and pulled him outside and slammed the door.

Roustabouts were changing teams on the stage-coach. Buck noticed that Tortilla Joe packed a rifle in a leather scabbard tied to the side of his high seat. Ma Jorgenson's outfit was ready for any trouble that came its way, he saw.

They climbed on to the seat. Buck gave the jerk-line a tug; his whip talked over the backs of the mules. Mules grudgingly moved against collars, and the heavy load started to roll, with the broad-rimmed wheels sinking into the mud. Rain slanted in, driven by a wicked wind.

Pines murmured. Spruce bent. Cottonwoods rattled their leaves. Buck shifted his feet. His boots had dried somewhat in Half-way House and his feet had become warmed. But the moment he had climbed on to the wagon his boots seemed to instantly become ice-cold again; his feet immediately turned to glacier coldness.

"I might have to trim down that Mex's horns," he told

Barrel MacShane. "He's drawin' too much water for the size of his keel."

"He's an o'nerly son, no two ways about thet."

They reached the summit, and Buck glanced back along the muddy ruts; the Western Freight stage was in the act of leaving Half-way House.

"He sure can handle them ribbons," Buck admitted.

"My little feet," Barrel MacShane grunted, "is danged near fruz."

Again rain came with savage wickedness. It ran off their rain-coats and rain-hats and made the road even more difficult to travel. Again Buck thought of Charlie's Place down in Old Messilla. He was up against a stone wall. It was long and high; he couldn't go around it or through it or over it.

Finally they slowly rolled into Hardrock. Dusk was thick. Kerosene lamps and lanterns in homes and business establishments tried to push back the encroaching darkness.

Buck halted his tired mules in front of Dunlap Stages' office.

Spider LaMarr hollered, "Light and come in, men. I'll get a fresh skinner to move that load up to the mines. Snaky, get a wiggle on, and climb on thet seat!"

Buck and Barrel gingerly walked into the office and planted themselves around the stove, that was red-sided. Spider LaMarr turned, his swivel-chair protesting, and he said, "No trouble, eh?"

"Not a bit," Buck said.

The fresh skinner moved the wagon away.

Buck warmed himself for a while, listening idly to Barrel MacShane and Spider LaMarr talking. He said, "Me for the Hardrock Café and chuck."

"You kinda got a shine on for Elsie, ain't you?" Buck saw Spider LaMarr wink good-naturedly at MacShane.

"Nice gal," Buck said, smiling.

He cut through the alley behind the office of Western Freight. Out of the dusk came a rider trotting his bronc

down the alley. Buck pulled out of sight into an old shed and watched the rider. The horse looked like he had been ridden hard. The rider dismounted, untied a sack from behind the saddle, then led the bronc into the barn.

Buck recognized the rider despite the dusk. He gave this act some thought, saw nothing significant in it, and then went to the Hardrock Café, which, as usual, was filled. He ordered and ate, and when he stopped to pay Elsie he said, meaningly, "This place is so busy I can't find a chance to put my arm around you—you're always on the go."

Elsie smiled. "Some other time, Buck. Corner me in the kitchen." Then she was gone. Buck turned quickly as a Western Freight man barged into the café.

"Western Freight done lost another stage—passengers and all—went into Deadman's Gulch. Slud for a hundred feet——"

"Who was handlin' ribbons?"

"That Mexican—Tortilla Joe!"

The café had heard the words. Questions were thrown at the informer. Buck remembered Deadman's Gulch—a deep, brush-choked canyon with steep walls. When he and Barrel MacShane had gone over the road it had been stout and substantial, and now the stage——

"Anybody hurt?" Buck demanded.

"A man got killed, another woman is hurt bad."

"How about the Mexican?"

"I dunno about him. A messenger from Half-way House jes' brought the news to Ma an' Nita. He didn't mention the Mex."

Outside Buck met Marshal White. "I gotta get out there, McKee. How was the road when you come over it?"

"Stout, sir."

"Come along, eh?"

Buck said, "I'll get my bronc from behind the Stage office," and he ran through the dusk. When he entered the barn, Spider LaMarr and Barrel MacShane were already in saddle. "I'm headin' out with you," Buck said.

LaMarr said, "You'll have to ride like hell," and he and MacShane used their quirts, their broncs leaping into a wild run.

Buck slung up his saddle, caught the cinch, and tied the latigo. He went out with one boot in stirrup, hopping for a ways, and then swinging up. The thought came that maybe, for once, he and Tortilla Joe had bit off more than they could chew.

The marshal hollered, "Wait for me, McKee."

But Buck fed his bronc the rowels. Gradually he pulled up on LaMarr and MacShane. They passed a buggy, and Buck saw Nita and Ma Jorgenson in it, with Ma handling the reins and with Nita handling the whip.

Buck drove his bronc around the rig and left it behind.

Nita hollered something, but he could not make out her words.

Finally he caught LaMarr and Barrel MacShane. LaMarr was an octopus in his saddle, wiry and tall and gangly, leaning low over the fork. MacShane was a human barrel, sitting astraddle a big grey.

LaMarr said, "You ride a fast bronc, Buck."

Buck said nothing. Fear was in him—fear for the safety of Tortilla Joe. He lifted his quirt, his bronc forging ahead.

CHAPTER TWELVE

THE heavy Concord stage had tumbled off the grade on a curve. It had then rolled about two hundred feet down a slope almost perpendicular. There it had become wedged against some huge granite boulders, that had stopped its descent very abruptly. Behind it, as it fell, had come boulders loosened by the slide; these had smashed against the coach, too.

Already aid had come out from Half-way House. Improvised stretchers had been made, and Buck got hold of the handles of one to help. The dead man lay on the grade, with a saddle-blanket stretched over him. The most-injured passengers were being loaded into spring wagons and were being transported to Half-way House. To make matters worse, the rain started even harder, pounding down on them and making climbing up and down the slope a slippery proposition.

"She's the worst wreck yet," Spider LaMarr grunted. "We've never had anything like this before. Looks to me as if the entire grade slid when the stage-coach went over it."

"Rain loosened it, prob'ly," Barrel MacShane grunted, studying the slide with an appraising glance. "This rain has soaked in deep into the ground. Made it like mush, and that stage was loaded heavy, and when it hit that mushy spot——" He made violent gestures with his big hands.

"This is one they can't blame on Dunlap Stages," Spider LaMarr said.

Rain beat in with a windy gust that made them all bend their heads. The pine trees made mournful songs in the night. Lanterns were dull eyes that fought to penetrate the Arizona blackness. They moved as men moved, and the shadows were long.

"They'll try," MacShane grunted. "They'll claim we dynamited that ledge, or somethin' like that."

"They do that," Spider LaMarr gritted, "and by hell, I'll give Ma Jorgenson a fight. Wish she didn't wear petticoats!"

Buck knew that such a charge would be logical. He and Barrel MacShane had rolled tons of machinery over this grade right before the lighter stage had hit it. The grade had been solid then. A piece of dynamite, placed back under the ledge, could have loosened that grade enough to make this wreck.

"Solid when we went over it," he said quietly. "Me an' Barrel was the last rig to travel it, too." He did not want to make his voice too anxious as he asked, "Wonder where the Mex is?"

"Over there, among them wagons."

Buck went over to where three wagons were grouped. Tortilla Joe sat under one of the wagons, a lantern beside him, and a group surrounding him. Buck said, "Better some of you go down to the stage and help," and pushed through the crowd. He hunkered beside Tortilla Joe and asked, "Did you get hurt?"

"I jomped. She hurt my back." The Mexican grimaced, twisted, then settled down. "But what differences she make to you, fella? You work for the Dunlap Stages, not for the Western Freight."

Now that his partner was all right, Buck allowed himself a smile. "Always interested in stage-drivers and in lost dogs," he said. "They both have such ugly faces and look like somebody's just booted them in the ribs."

Somebody snickered, another man laughed.

Tortilla Joe rose for the bait like a hungry rainbow trout. "Look, McKee," he gritted. "This road she all right when you go over it, *sabe*? You last rig over this road. Then I comes along and lose my stage——"

Buck growled, "Don't accuse me of nothin', Mexican!"

"You over it last," Tortilla Joe repeated. "I no want troubles weeth you. You cause the troubles with me."

Spider LaMarr said, "Come over here, McKee. Don't start no trouble."

Now another voice cut in—a heavy, sarcastic voice. "Yeah, LaMarr, your rig was over it last. You pulled that heavy ore-wagon over this road, an' it carried three tons of machinery and it held then. Why would it suddenly go down when my light stage-coach went over it?"

Spider LaMarr looked at the rain-streaked face of Ma Jorgenson. The smell of stale whisky was on the air, and it came from Ma. Her scraggly hair hung in wet strands and she had the air of a cornered dog. This had hit her hard. She still had trouble and law-suits from the last wreck Tortilla Joe had had. Buck glanced at Nita. The girl's lips were tight, her nose was in the air. She saw Buck's glance, and suddenly she softened. She moved over and got his arm and whispered, "Let's get away from here, Buck."

"All right."

Marshal White had intervened between Spider LaMarr and the irate Ma Jorgenson. Nita and Buck went to the edge of the grade, her hand still on his arm. "Mother is drinking again, Buck, and she isn't responsible for what she is saying. Isn't this awful, though? Terrible."

"Odd that that road should suddenly shift."

"Maybe your heavy load loosened it and the stage did the rest?"

Buck admitted that that was possible. He felt sorry for Ma. She was a woman competing in a man's business world, and she had a lot of misfortune. He found himself thinking that Spider LaMarr had nothing to do with this wreck. Of course, LaMarr could have ridden out to this point, dynamited this grade, and then cut across country to be in town when he and Barrel MacShane arrived with the loaded wagon. That was possible; yes, and probable, also. The cold-bloodedness of such an act caused Buck's blood to curdle. Could anybody—man or woman—be cold-blooded

enough to deliberately let a stage filled with innocent passengers slide over a cliff as steep as this Deadman's Gulch cliff?

LaMarr didn't seem to be such a cold-blooded man. For some reason Buck found himself thinking this was an act of God, not of selfish Man. His attention was brought back to Nita, who had walked over to the left about ten feet and had picked up something from the ground. The movement was very quick and Buck asked, "Find something?"

She whispered, "A ten-dollar gold piece, Buck."

"Lucky girl."

She had not looked at her find. She had reached down, grabbed it, and put it in her rain-coat pocket. Buck wondered how she knew it was a ten-dollar gold piece; she had not looked at it. But maybe the light of the lanterns had shown it clearly enough to identify it on the ground.

They had cut loose the horses. They were skinned and battered, but none was injured beyond bruises and skinned legs. That was miraculous. Slowly the injured passengers were carried up the declivity. There they were loaded into rigs and taken to Half-way House. The two docs from Hardrock were at the Half-way House to take care of the injured. Buck and Nita worked hard, and Barrel MacShane helped, too. Some of the curious drifted away. Ma Jorgenson got a crew out to repair the road. Shovels pushed down dirt from the inner side of the grade; other shovels transported the soil to the edge of the road. Gradually it built up. Rocks went into the fill to give it a firm foundation.

Freight wagons were held up at Half-way House until the road was open again. The other rigs—wagons and the stages—coming from Phoenix stopped on the south side of the slide, and their drivers got to work with picks and shovels. The men of Dunlap Stages worked shoulder to shoulder with the hired hands of Ma Jorgenson. Buck noticed that Ma occasionally took strong nips from her bottle. Her bull-like voice was heard everywhere.

"What happened to your father?" Buck asked Nita.

"He ran away from Mother." She looked at him. "Mother isn't the most well-mannered person in the world, Buck, but she has a good heart. Dad couldn't stand her orders, he told me, and her voice drove him crazy."

"I don't blame him," Buck said.

Nita looked up at the new fill. "Those igneous rocks should hold it. It looks like a conglomerate mess now, doesn't it?"

Buck looked at her. "I know what an igneous rock is—it's one formed by heat. But the other word—*con* something or other——"

"A *conglomerate* is a geological term. It means the rocks are water-washed, with the big ones naturally to the bottom."

Buck grinned. "I learned something. Where did you learn them big words, girl."

"In college. I just came home at the end of mid-term in February. I flunked out. Too many boys, I guess."

"Where did you go—back east?"

Suddenly she seemed to want to shift the subject. "Yes, back east. We'd best get to work."

They were trying to right the stage-coach. One wheel had been replaced, for the original wheel had snapped its spokes at the hub. They planned to get it on all four wheels and then inch it up the mountain grade with a winch that was being anchored to a huge boulder at the top of the grade, and on the uphill side of the road. The chain from the winch would be fastened to the tongue of the stage-coach.

Buck dug into the damp earth and wondered why the girl had so abruptly changed the subject. Most people who went to college were proud of the fact and proud of their college, and yet she had not wanted to mention the name of the school she had attended. He put this upon the fact that she had been kicked out because of low grades. Well, the girl had pride: pride meant a lot in this world. Without pride a man had no self-respect, and without egoism he was as good

as dead—just a walking piece of flesh wearing out sole leather.

Spider LaMarr bossed the job of getting the stage-coach on its wheels. He knew men, Buck noticed, and he could get work out of men. He was slow-moving, but he was not slow thinking. Buck toiled with his shovel, with Barrel MacShane beside him; together they dug in silence. The rain came and went, sometimes a driving force, sometimes a fine mist. They worked in spite of it. Word came back that Tortilla Joe had sprained his back very little, and the docs said he would recover with plenty of liniment and a respite from work. Buck smiled, knowing his partner would object to the former and gladly welcome the latter. A shyster lawyer had headed down from Hardrock and was soliciting the passengers to bring suit against Western Freight. One of Ma's mule-skinners had worked him over with his fists, slammed him into his buggy, and had run him out of Half-way House. Now the lawyer, always anxious to sue, was going to sue the mule-skinner. He had departed with a bloody nose, no cases, and with great haste, it was reported.

"Move some dirt about here," LaMarr said. "With that spot level we might be able to get it on its wheels."

Buck said, "We'll move it, boss."

A woman's voice said, "Hello, Mr. LaMarr. Hello, men. Oh, wasn't this wreck terrible, though!"

Buck looked up into the pretty face of Mrs. Hank Dunlap. Matt wore a big rain-coat about two sizes too large, she had on rubber boots, and her face was sweet and pretty under the big rain-hat, also too large.

Old Hank was a lucky stiff, Buck realized. Once he had doubted this woman's love for the Old Man and he had figured she had married Old Hank for his money. He had made a violent change of opinion lately. Any respectable woman who would become a dance-hall harpy just to help her sick husband was, in his book, a darned good woman. She seemed to be playing up to LaMarr. That was only logical, and it was a good move, he realized.

"Why, hello, Matt." LaMarr doffed his hat despite the rain. "How did you come out here?"

She had caught a ride with a buggy. LaMarr told her she would have to ride back with him on the stage. Buck could lead back LaMarr's bronc to Hardrock. Buck nodded, leaned on his shovel, said, "How about tryin' to get this rig on its wheels, boss? We got a level spot cleared."

LaMarr's slow glance did some mental arithmetic. "We can do it now," he said. "All of you men get on the down side of this rig and push. Get timbers, Buck—you too, Barrel—and buck up the down side as we go along."

"Can I help?" Matt wanted to know.

"Sure," Buck joked. "Stay outa the way."

She made a face at him, and that made her prettier than ever. The men got below the stage and pushed and pushed. Timbers held it as it moved upward. Men rested, the timbers holding the stage at an angle; they pushed again—the stage tottered, almost fell on them, then rocked over and stood on its four wheels.

"We got it," Barrel MacShane said jubilantly.

The hardest part of the job had been finished. The chain was fastened to the tongue through the steel loop. Slowly the winch lifted the stage upward. Occasionally they had to stop the upward progress to move boulders and trees out of the way. By this time dawn was in the sky—a grey, ugly dawn seemingly dulled by the wind and rain. Men were wet to the bone, despite slickers. The proprietor of Half-way House sent out can after can of hot coffee, and Nita and Matt served it in tin cups. Men cradled hot coffee in cold, shivering hands. Tortilla Joe came down the grade, sliding in the mud.

Buck said, "Thought you were dying, Mex?"

"You shut the beeg mouth, or I shut heem for you!"

Spider LaMarr murmured, "Don't rub him no longer, McKee. The fella hates your guts now."

"He sure does."

Tortilla Joe went to work with a shovel. Evidently his

back had been hurt less than the medicos claimed. He told all in hearing distance that he was quitting Western Freight. He had had two tough wrecks each time he had taken out the stage-coach. Ma Jorgenson heard him, and hollered down that she wouldn't let him quit. Wasn't his fault, she said.

Tortilla Joe said, "That case, I no quit." Unnoticed, he winked at Buck, who kept a stony-hard face.

The winch ground out its noises, chain wrapping around the steel drum—slowly the stage rose upward, reluctantly going against the gravity of the hill. More rocks were moved, more trees cut down, more brush ripped out. Then the front wheels were on the road; soon the entire stage stood on the road.

"Well, we got it, Ma." LaMarr seemed to have overlooked the woman's earlier anger. "Glad to be of help to you, lady."

"We got the road finished, too." Ma Jorgenson's voice was, for some reason, rather hoarse—more hoarse than usual. "Good to have a good neighbour, Spider."

They shook hands. It was a solemn moment, and Buck said, "Shore wish I had a drink."

"We got a gallon," Ma said. "Have at it, men. You drink first, Spider."

Buck awaited his turn to drink. He was cold and wet and miserable; his boots were sopping wet. Spider LaMarr passed the jug to Barrel MacShane. Then again the huge, work-worn hand of Ma Jorgenson grasped the hand of Spider LaMarr.

Buck thought, These two ain't enemies. They're friends. They wouldn't harm each other for love or money. Then who is doing this dirty work?

Nita said, "Ma repaired this road in a hurry."

Buck grinned. "Yep, it's *conglomerate* now, eh?" His smile was mischievous, despite his cold boots. "You old college gals know too much."

Nita said nothing, but it seemed that her face suddenly

became stiff and uncompromising as she turned away. Buck wondered about that. Then he blamed it on the dim light of the dawn. He had just imagined this, and he let it go at that. He drank of the jug.

The whisky was red hot.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

THE fact that a passenger had been killed in a stage-coach wreck made little imprint upon Hardrock, Territory of Arizona. The town was young, and youth is mad, and Hardrock heard about the wreck, talked about it for a moment, and then forgot it. For a few days stages came and went, freight-wagons rolled along through the mud, and the rain came down. When it didn't rain there was a mist; when the mist left, rain took its place.

Buck said, "Will it ever stop, men?"

He and Barrel MacShane and Spider LaMarr were sitting in the dirty office of the Dunlap Stages. Tobacco smoke filled the air and cigar- and cigarette-butts littered the floor along with wisps of paper and other debris. Cotton Top was industriously plying a broom, but making little progress, although he was raising a huge cloud of dust.

"Cotton Top, for the love of Hades, quit that and get out of here!" Spider LaMarr coughed.

"This outfit is so dirty," the Negro said. "I dunno how you can tell from the books whether we is makin' money or losin' money."

"We're losing it, and I mean that. Now pull out of here and leave us alone."

Cotton Top looked at them with a wide smile. "Them is the best words I've heard for a long, long time. I'm headin' for my bunk in the hay."

"You're headin' out to grease wagons with Smoky and Joe," the boss of Dunlap Stages ordered.

Cotton Top left, still smiling. Buck McKee leaned back in his chair. He had just come in with a freight-wagon from Phoenix. The strip of road Ma Jorgenson had put in had held up nicely and was solid and hard. Nita had gone with

him and had returned by stage. She had waved gaily at him as the stage had passed him and his slower rig.

"Too damn' quiet," Barrel MacShane grunted, looking at his cigar. "Somebody give you this rope, boss, and was it so rotten you gave it to me to get rid of it?"

"The gambler down at the Broken Lily gave it to me. Must have horsehair in it instead of tobacco."

Buck got to his feet. "Me for some chuck. Wonder how Ma Jorgenson is gettin' along with her law-suits."

"That man—the one who was hurt bad in the wreck—he died this morning," LaMarr said.

Buck halted, hand on the doorknob. "That's tough. More trouble for the poor ol' gal."

Barrel MacShane scowled. "I done wonder about that cut fallin' off like that. Ain't logical."

"Rained a lot that night," LaMarr said.

For days they had discussed the possibilities of sabotage. But although the conversation skipped from point to point, it always came back to its starting place. None of them had blasted that grade. Then, if they hadn't blasted it, who had—if, after all, it had been dynamited? They therefore arrived at the same point they had started from.

"No use talkin' that," Buck said. "We've threshed that out from all angles already. Had to be the rain what did it."

He pushed his way out on to Hardrock's main street. He wondered if the street were ever without a throng. But someday it would be a ghost town, he knew. All these mining towns had their wild heyday, then the ore petered out, men and women left—the bats and lizards then own the town. But such thoughts were of no importance when related to the predicament at hand. He and Tortilla Joe had been in this wild boom town almost two weeks. They had got into trouble and had met trouble and had come out of this trouble with no conclusive evidence pointing toward any guilty persons.

He ate at the Hardrock Café, tried to hold Elsie's hand; she pulled her hand back, though—she had had lots of practice and she was very quick. Her eyes, though, were bold.

"Some afternoon we'll go horseback riding, Buck."

"I'd like to chase you through the brush. Bet I can catch you, too."

"Oh, so that's it—then I won't go . . . maybe?"

Her glance was anything but coy.

Buck paid his bill and went outside into the rain, toothpick at an angle. Tortilla Joe hurried by and went into the café. Buck gave him a lift of his hand, and then he crossed the street to the Broken Lily, remembering Elsie's words. They made little difference to him. He had only been joking. He did not want a woman. Women only tied a man down; they had babies—and a big, fat baby boy sure kept a man's nose to the grindstone and kept his boots hobbled. Buck liked babies when somebody else had them. He entered the Broken Lily, stepping to one side as the bouncer heaved out a drunken miner.

The miner sprawled in the mud, cursing the burly bouncer. Buck said, "Mister, you oughta be more careful. You danged near hit me with thet gent. I'm a payin' customer, too."

The narrowed eyes settled on him pugnaciously. The gruff voice said, "You want to make something out of it?"

Buck shook his head. "It wouldn't be with fists," he said quietly. "I'd not use a fist on your thick Irish skull. I'd use a gun on you, and I'll kill you, savvy."

The man stepped back, leered at him, then walked away. Buck had meant every word he had said, and the bouncer had known it. Buck grinned coldly, and went to the bar, where he ordered a short beer. He was sipping it when the owner came behind the bar and said, "Howdy, Buck."

Buck said, "Howdy, friend. That bouncer of yours almost hit me with a drunk he threw out the door. If he crosses Buck McKee, I'm not using fists on him, savvy?"

"I'll talk to him."

"You don't need to. I'll handle him if he crosses me again."

"Somebody'll kill him," the man said. "He's too cocky."

He'll get his sooner or later. You might just as well be the man, Buck."

Buck put his back to the bar, beer-glass in hand, and watched the crowd. Tobacco smoke was thick. Card games were going and the bar was lined. The shotgun guard sat behind the card-tables on his high chair, and he had a rifle across his legs. He saw Buck and lifted his hand. Buck returned the gesture. Matt Dunlap was sitting at a table with a man who obviously was very drunk. His head kept sinking lower and lower; he brought it up with savage jerks. Buck's glance met that of Matt; Buck nodded slightly. Matt regarded him without a trace of emotion on her pretty face. She had on a long gown with a low-cut front. Buck swung his gaze around, and locked eyes with the bouncer. He showed a tight, ugly little smile, and the bouncer looked away.

Buck stood there for a few minutes, killed his beer, and started for the stairs at the far end of the long saloon. The bouncer watched him. Tortilla Joe was just entering the saloon. Buck sauntered up the stairs, reached the top, and then ducked into a room, leaving the door open slightly. The room belonged to one of the dance-hall girls and was now empty. It had the smell of perfume and other feminine bits of finery. Buck waited. Soon the bouncer came up the stairs, turned to make the corner, and Buck stepped out behind him. His heavy .45 came down on the man's head, the barrel making a loud sound. The man's knees went in and Buck kicked him. The bouncer rolled down the stairs, landed in a heap on the floor, and didn't move. Buck's gaze met that of the proprietor.

"Tell him who did it," he said.

"I'm runnin' him out of town, McKee. Here, you two men, get hold of him, throw him on Dunlap Stages, and he'll wake up on the road to Phoenix. Good work, Buck."

"Thanks." Buck spoke dryly. He holstered his gun and walked down the hallway. He glanced around; nobody watched; he ducked into Matt's room. He took a chair and sat and waited.

Noise seeped through the floor. From outside came the sounds made by passers-by, by rigs. Up on the slope the stamp-mills pounded and jarred the earth. For twenty-four hours each day this noise persisted. He was getting tired of it.

His thoughts swung around to the burly bouncer.

The bouncer and Barrel MacShane were friends. He had seen them talking together a number of times in the saloon. For some reason the big bouncer had never liked him. Buck wondered now if the man had not deliberately thrown out the drunk with the hope of hitting him, Buck, as he entered the Broken Lily. The bouncer and he had had some words over a card game a few days before. It had been a friendly game of rummy, and Buck had figured the bouncer had been welshing on his score. Buck had kidded him, but his words had held another meaning.

Well, the bouncer was out of town now. When he came to he'd be on the stage bound for Phoenix, and he'd have a lump on his skull by which to remember a gent named Buck McKee.

Boots and slippers moved back and forth along the hall. Buck moved over and lay on the bed. The pillow had a faint perfume, and the mattress was soft. The next thing he knew Tortilla Joe was shaking him. Matt Dunlap sat across the room, pretty legs crossed, smiling at him.

"Wake up, McKee."

Buck sat up and yawned. "Reckon I was plumb tuckered out. How long you two been here?"

Tortilla Joe said, "I been here about ten meenutes. I jus' let you sleep. Matt, she jus' come here."

Buck sat on the edge of the bed. "Well, this is a council of war, folks. We seem to be gettin' nowhere in a whale of a hurry. What do you know for sure, Matt?"

Both men looked at Matt Dunlap.

"I know one thing, Buck: you sure made an enemy out of Kelly."

"Kelly?"

"That bouncer you slugged."

"Oh," Buck smiled, but the smile was worried. "You know, Matt, that gink never did like me, and I never could figger out what he could possibly have against me. I wonder if he was part of this deal?"

"They threw him on the stage."

"He out of thees now," Tortilla Joe stated. "The boss downstairs he give heem orders not to come back. He get note printed an' put on his vest——"

Matt said, suddenly, "That reminds me of something." She crossed the room and opened a dresser drawer and took out a square of cardboard. "This was on my dresser last night when I came off work."

Buck looked at the sign:

Get out of this town, and stay out!
If you value your life, move, and move
fast and far!

Carefully he studied the printing before handing the sign to Tortilla Joe, who studied it as though he could read. Finally Tortilla Joe's curiosity got the best of him. "You read heem for me, Matt?"

Matt read the sign.

Buck said, "That printin' looks like the printin' that was on the sign I had on my *bosom* when I come to after somebody slugged me back in thet alley. My sign was printed on the same kinda material, too—looks like the side of a boot box or shoe box, don't it?"

"It sure does," Matt said. "That means, then, that these two signs were made by the same persons, or person?"

"Looks that way to me."

"You move?" Tortilla Joe asked of Matt.

"Oh, sure," she said ironically. "I'm going to run right out of this town." She grinned at Buck. "I've got a little .32 on me, and it's right in Mama's brassière, too—right handy."

"Good idea," Buck said.

She walked the floor, her dress swishing. "I'm getting

tired of running around like an idiot, and I'm getting tired of drinking tea!" She grimaced prettily. "My office back in Denver is piled high with mail to be answered, I'll bet. Men, we have to finish this, because I have to go back to work. Lincoln will be writing for money again, and I don't want his letters to get to Old Hank, for he has enough worries trying to get well."

"Lincoln?" Tortilla Joe asked.

"The Old Man's boy. In college back east. All he wants is money, money, money. I don't know what he does with it."

"Conglomerate," Buck said.

Both looked at him.

Matt asked, "Why the big word, Buck?"

"I learned it from Nita. She went to college back east. Got kicked out at mid-term, she told me—grades too low. But that's neither here nor there. I'm watching everybody—LaMarr, Barrel MacShane, even that coloured boy, Cotton Top. I've got some ideas, but I'd like to keep them to myself until they either pan out right or show they are false."

"I believe LaMarr is innocent," Matt said. "I've played up to him and he'll eat out of my hand, but he isn't in on this, and I'm sure of that. Ma Jorgenson has lots of troubles, but she seems okay to me. There must be a third party somewhere."

"But who she ees?" Tortilla Joe asked.

They talked some more. They decided to meet within three days, and they set the hour. Tortilla Joe left first, going down the stairs into the saloon; Buck left after ten minutes, going down the back steps into the alley.

The last time he had walked down this alley a man had lifted a gun against him and had tried to kill him. Who that man had been he did not know. It seemed illogical that again a man should try to ambush him. But this man did not get away. For Buck was forced to kill him in self-defence.

He was at the foot of the stairway when he saw the man step out of a shed about fifty feet away. He was a big man,

and he crouched; Buck saw the sudden swift lift of the man's Colt .45. Buck McKee moved to the right, fast on his feet, his cold boots for once forgotten; as he moved he drew his gun. Then he was crouched, just as this other man was crouched; he was a human ball, low and wicked and mean. And out of this ball came the flame of his pistol.

He shot four times, his palm flicking back and forth as he fanned his hammer. His gun rock-steady, he shot with intent; he made each bullet hit its mark. The man ahead moved suddenly, and he dropped his pistol. He came to his feet, then his knees broke, and he fell on his face.

Buck stopped shooting then.

When Marshal White and the others arrived, Buck had rolled the man over on his back. His bullets had beaten through a heavy chest. The dead man's lips were loose, his jowls were sunken and flabby.

Marshal White asked, "Is he dead, McKee?"

"He forced me to kill him," Buck said tonelessly. His belly didn't feel too steady and his hands trembled.

"He got off the stage just as it rolled out of town," the marshal said, "I warned him, but he said he'd be good."

A dance-hall girl, standing on the edge of the crowd, asked, "Who is the dead man?" and a man said, "The bouncer, Kelly."

"He had it coming," the girl said, and turned toward the saloon.

Buck glanced at Tortilla Joe. The Mexican stood with his mouth open as he looked at the dead bouncer. Buck's glance passed to Matt Dunlap. Their eyes met. Had Kelly been a member of this unknown ring, this insidious gang of death?

Well, if he had, he couldn't tell about it now.

Buck felt a soft hand steal into his. He looked down at Nita Jorgenson's dark, lovely face.

"Come with me, Buck," she whispered.

He nodded, and they walked away, hand in hand.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

NITA took him to the Hardrock Café and spiked hot coffee and got this down him. Buck felt better. He had not wanted to kill Kelly. But he had had to kill him in order to save his own life. Nita and Elsie agreed to this. He voiced the opinion that it seemed odd that Kelly should carry a grudge out to such a finish. Surely he should have been man enough to admit he was in the wrong and to shake hands like a good sport and call the deal off?

"He was a stubborn man," Nita said.

Buck looked at her. "Did you know him very well?"

"Not very well." She did not meet his gaze. She made doodles on a menu with a toothpick. "We did haul in some equipment for the Broken Lily, though, and Kelly helped our men move it out from Phoenix—all he did was want to argue, the men said. Well, he'll argue no longer."

"Unless he's arguing with the devil," Elsie put in. "Here, drink some more coffee, Buck."

Buck said, "It's runnin' out my ears now."

Marshal White came in and took a stool next to Buck. He asked routine questions: Who had pulled a gun first? How many times had Buck shot? How many shots had Kelly got in? Buck answered them all. Marshal White stood and scowled. Buck looked at him and asked, "Well?"

"No use havin' a coroner's inquest," the lawman said. "Just cost the county money—a needless expense. I'll take your word, McKee, that he pulled first. He got mad at you for buffaloin' him an' rollin' him down them stairs, I reckon. No other reason for him wantin' to kill you, is they?"

"Not that I know about."

The marshal started for the door, stopped, turned. "You

didn't know him from somewhere back along the trail, did you? You never had a run-in with him in some other town?"

Buck shook his head. "Never met him until I came to Hardrock."

The marshal looked at Elsie. He looked at Nita. His gaze returned to Buck, and his smile was thin. "I'll sure be glad when you pull outa Hardrock, McKee."

"I'll be damned glad to go, too."

Marshal White kept his eyes sharp. "You remind me of a gent I used to know about ten years ago. Had a little run-in with him. His name too was McKee or McGee or something like that."

"Couldn't be me," Buck said. "First time I ever was in this burg. Might have been my uncle, Nels."

"Where is he now?"

"They hanged him," Buck lied.

White didn't know whether he was joking or telling the truth. He nodded, and walked outside, becoming lost in the crowd. Buck grinned and got to his feet and offered to pay for the coffee, but Elsie would take no pay. He and Nita went outside, and Elsie stood and watched them.

"That marshal would question his old mother," Buck grunted.

Nita said, "Well, I have to get to work on Ma's books. Another month when we use the red ink. And when these law-suits come along——" She made a wry face. "We got a lot of money invested in this freight line, too. Around twenty thousand dollars, Buck."

"Dunlap Stages must have more than that," Buck said.

"Yes, I'd judge about thirty thousand."

Buck thought, *Fifty thousand bucks, and that's a lot of money.* He said, "LaMarr claims he might have to sell Dunlap Stages to break even, the way things are running now. He might have to close his doors."

"That would be good . . . for us."

"It sure would."

She left him, and he watched her walk away. She had a

nice-looking back and she carried herself nicely, too. A woman as ugly as Ma Jorgenson had no right having such a lovely daughter. Buck went to the Dunlap Stages office, where he took a chair and put his boots close to the fire. He was alone for about half an hour, and he was dozing when MacShane and Spider LaMarr entered. His head came up with a snap, and LaMarr grinned.

"Get some shut-eye, Buck, because you and MacShane roll out a loaded wagon come daylight. More mine-machinery needing repairs."

"They sure wreck machinery up there," Buck said.

"Hard ore. Lots of power needed to break it. Power means wrecked machinery. Rain might let up by then and you have clear skies."

"It can stop any time for me," Buck grunted.

LaMarr lowered his gaunt bulk into his Douglas chair. "McKee, did this gent Kelly tie in somewhere with this trouble that has hit these two stage-lines?"

"I don't know. I only know him from the saloon, and he always has seemed to hate me, and I never have knowned why."

Barrel MacShane said one word. "Nita."

"Why bring her in on this?" Buck wanted to know.

MacShane lifted his shaggy head. "He went strong for her. He tried some plays and he got somewhere until you came into view. She switched away from him then and—well, she's sweet on you, McKee."

Buck smiled. "Be damned if it's my fault. I've given her not a bit of encouragement, MacShane."

"She went for you for a while, didn't she?" LaMarr was speaking to his strawboss, MacShane.

"She got over that fast," MacShane said.

MacShane actually seemed embarrassed. And that, to Buck, seemed odd. They talked about Kelly for a while, and the words went around and around—they solved nothing. Buck did some work on a harness and curried some mules and then hit the sougans early. The usual card game

was in progress, one skinner played a mournful dirge on a mouth-organ, and up on the hill the mills glowed and men went into the darkness of the earth with picks and lanterns and grubbed for ore. The gold had been there for centuries. It had lain locked in the earth. For æons it had brooded and slept and waited; a man had come along one day—he had picketed his burro to a stake on the side of the mountain. That night the burro had pulled up the picket-pin and had got loose. The miner had chased him and had finally caught him. During the chase the miner had stumbled over a ledge of rock. He had gone back out of curiosity to look at the ledge. His heavy brogan had kicked loose a piece of quartz. He had seen gold in it, his hands had trembled—he had hollered with drunken greed. His hammer had smashed the gold, his pan had panned it; his pick had hacked into the ledge, following the vein. And so gold was found, and because of gold the mills pounded and men went into the black maw of their mother, into the dark womb of time. There they picked and sweated and swore and brought up yellow and evil gold.

Because a heavy boot had kicked a ledge, the town of Hardrock became a roaring hell-town. Women plied their aged and illicit trade, men patronized them, men fought, men loved, men killed. Kelly had come because of the gold, and now Kelly lay in the tent used as a morgue. He lay on a pine-slab beside the miner who that day had been killed in a drift when rock had crashed down to crush his skull. Kelly had no greed, no desire, no hope, no taste, no feel, no smell. Kelly knew nothing. If there were a future beyond life, then Kelly knew of it; Kelly would tell nobody, though.

Buck did not like the thought of sending a man into the Unknown. The world, in its primal way, was a good world—even though one animal existed upon the blood of another. The sun was good, the rain was kind; the pines talked, the spruce moved; lightning slashed the sky, promising clear skies. When man tired of this goodness, there was alcohol to dull him into stupidity. Kelly had allowed physical

emotions to overcome logic, and Kelly was dead—dead with the bullets of Buck McKee in him.

Buck listened to the harmonica. All the time his thoughts moved and grouped, and they sought clarification. He kept thinking of Nita Jorgenson. She was young, she was small, she was dark: yet, she was a woman—and she owned a woman's sense of logic. She had come and she had taken him gently away from the scene of Kelly's death.

Yet, in this kindness, somehow, he perceived something else: an element of hardness, of strange sternness. He remembered her face when he had asked her about college. She had lost interest; she had walked away. Buck hoped she was not in love with him, for he did not love her. He knew, then, she wasn't. She was only helping him, being kind to him.

And, if she did not love him, why did she do these things?

He mulled on that question.

He found no answer for it.

Somebody wanted both of these stage-lines, it seemed. That meant, then, that a third party—an outside party—was doing this damage. But surely they must have had help from inside—wagon-reaches had broken for no apparent reason; wheels had flopped off from broken axles; the road had caved off and the stage had fallen. Whoever was doing it was doing this with a ruthless ambition. For the stage had carried humans, not freight. To wreck a load of freight was one thing; to deliberately try to kill humans was a horse of another colour altogether. . . .

Marshal White came in, pulled up a chair, sat beside Buck's bed. Buck wished he had some way of knowing what thoughts ran through the head of this gaunt lawman. White said, "Almost asleep, eh?"

"Almost."

White was lazy and deceptive; his eyes were lidded. Buck put his weight on one elbow and twisted a cigarette.

"Light?" White asked.

The match flared and showed Buck's rugged, not hand-

some face. White broke the match and threw it on the floor. Out in the barn a mule kicked against his stall partition. One of the card-players laid down his hand and went out, cursing the mule.

White said, "We bury Kelly tomorrow. He had money on him, so the county misses that expense."

"Why tell me?"

"Thought you'd like to know."

Buck rolled on his back and blew smoke upward. "I don't give a continental damn," he told the lawman.

Both were silent. Finally White got to his feet and walked away. Buck killed his smoke and went to sleep. He had a rough, uncertain sleep; he kept dreaming of Kelly. Guns roared.

Time after time he awakened.

Then he would finally get back to sleep, and again he would be in that alley. His palm would lift, flash down; he felt the prong of the hammer rise and fall. Finally somebody was shaking him.

He looked up.

He looked into the thick wide face of Barrel MacShane. Lamplight showed the huge eyes, the thick lips.

"Time we get the wagon rollin', McKee."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

THE machinery consisted of a deep-well pump that had worn its propeller vanes down and had to go to Los Angeles for repairs. They log-chained two wagons together, taking the tongue off the rear wagon, and they had sixteen mules to pull it. The weight was enormous. Winches eased the pump on to the thick timbers laid over the wagons' gears. Slowly the steam crane lowered the pump into place. Timbers creaked, wheels settled in gravel; then the load was on the wagons. The mules stood with slack tugs, ears back, resting before the trip began. Lantern light showed on men as they scurried back and forth. Buck personally inspected each chain as it went over the load. He went over them almost link by link and, before each was jacked down tight, he gave permission to tighten it.

"We don't want no trouble," Barrel MacShane repeated over and over. "This is one load that is goin' through without a mishap."

"When you get this one to Phoenix, hurry hell for leather back!" The foreman smiled. "'Cause we'll have another one by then to haul, the way it looks. It's still operatin' but there's lots of noise in it."

"We'll haul it," Buck said.

"She's laced down, men."

Buck and MacShane got on the load and settled their weights into the seat. Buck said, "Get along, you long-eared sons of Satan," and his whip talked over the backs of the mules. They went into collars solidly and laid their weights against the load, and it rolled. They pulled out of the yard and came to the point where the hill slanted down into Hard-rock. They rough-locked all eight wheels and skidded the load down the hill, the mules braced against breechings. One

some slipped, almost went down; he got to his hoofs, tough and reliable. Chains dug into the soil and kept the load from sliding too fast. Reaches creaked, king-pins swivelled; the mules had their ears back, holding on. Buck did not use his whip now. He had both boots on the brakes, jamming them down; Barrel MacShane worked the hand-brake, his weight against it. Gradually they eased down the stiff incline, and the wagons stood on the level. Barrel MacShane released his hold and wiped his forehead.

"Cold as billy hell, Buck, and I'm sweatin'."

"That was a tough one."

Slowly they rolled down Main Street, wheels kissing gravel. Barrel said, "Let's stop in Hardrock for coffee. I'll spike it," but Buck said:

"We got a chore ahead of us, and no liquor."

Barrel gave him a sidewise look and said, "You'll join the church yet, McKee."

"I'll be the parson," Buck joked. "I'll get all the white meat off the chicken, and you'll get the bones and dark meat."

There was a light in the office of Western Freight. Buck saw Ma Jorgenson sitting in front of the desk, a lamp beside her. Her head was down and evidently she slept. Buck found himself feeling sorry for the woman. She had had her share of tough luck. Nita alone was enough of a hell-cat to make her life miserable.

Barrel MacShane took a drink from his flask. "For you one drink, McKee. Just one."

"Not for me, fella."

Gradually the dawn changed to daylight. Dawn tiptoed over the cold and wet peaks, caressing the pine and spruce, touching the canyons with a magic light that brought out their wild colours—indigo and blue and violet and red and brown. Buck found himself thinking that this was the first dawn Kelly had missed. That thought was not good; it held no meat.

Of one thing he was certain: he would wind up this Hard-

rock business as soon as possible, and he and Tortilla Joe would get out. Nobody or anything would stop him now—if needs be, his gun would talk. But he had little time for thoughts. He had plenty of work cut out for him today. Each hill found them rough-locking the eight wheels. They worked, wet to the skin; the rain fell. When it didn't rain there was a thick mist. Fog covered Wild Pine Summit. Buck had Barrel MacShane walk ahead with a lighted lantern. They met the stage then, and Tortilla Joe was handling the ribbons. He came out of the fog, big and dark with his stage; tugs rattled, horses stamped the damp and unwilling earth; he loomed out of the fog suddenly. He hollered, "Watch the curves, men," and then his stage was gone, the fog dragging it into its darkness. Buck hollered, "Handle those ribbons, and keep your big mouth shut."

MacShane came back, said, "It plays out right ahead of us, Buck." He caught the slowly-moving rig and went into the seat. He said, "Another snort at the bottle for me," and he gave Buck a belligerent glance.

Buck said nothing.

Suddenly the fog was gone, falling away into brilliant daylight; Half-way House lay in the basin below, the grass green and high around the log buildings. They rough-locked wheels again and fairly slid to a stop in front of the buildings. Buck went down and he and Barrel drank coffee while roustabouts changed the mule teams. Then a head came in the door and a roustabout said, "All set to roll, McKee, and watch the slants."

"I'm skinnin' these mules, not you."

"Cheerful cuss," the roustabout said, and his head went out of the door.

The new mules gingerly went against their collar-pads, having no taste for the chore ahead. Barrel MacShane eased his bulk into the seat, the springs sinking, and took out his bottle, still about half full. Buck reached over and took the bottle unexpectedly, and before the big man could protest,

the bottle was turning through the air to land on a boulder and break into pieces.

"McKee, damn it——"

"We need clear heads, Barrel, for the road to Phoenix."

"McKee, I could kill——"

Buck said, "Get off that seat, fella, and hop to it." He slung a leg over the edge of the wagon as though ready to step down.

MacShane wet his lips. His eyes seemed almost speculative, and anger had left them—in its place was a scheming deliberateness.

"Forget it," he said suddenly. "You're right and I'm wrong. Spider would can me if he knowed I'd tote a whisky bottle on this trip."

"He won't learn it from me. All I want beside me is a man with a clear head in case of an emergency."

"Sorry, McKee."

Buck said, "Thanks, friend."

Downhill loads have the right-of-way over uphill loads. That is an old adage of the freight-lines. During wet weather downhill-bound loads are hard to hold. Besides, mules need to be rested; the uphill pull tires them. Side-tracks had been built on hills so uphill-bound rigs could move off the road and rest. Buck and MacShane had trouble with two Western Freight skimmers on Hogback Ridge. They did not want to go into siding. There was room enough for the two vehicles to meet, but Buck and MacShane would have to take the outside track. They had a very heavy load—about twelve tons of freight—and they were afraid the outer edge of the road might crumble and slip their wagons off the road into the canyon. These long rains had made the soil uncertain, and they could not afford to take a chance.

"You gotta back up," MacShane said.

Both rigs had stopped. The lead-mules on each wagon stood face to face. MacShane stood wide-legged, big boots braced in mud, a scowl on his homely face. Buck wrapped

his jerk-line around the brake handle and came off the seat and moved over and stood beside MacShane.

The two Jorgenson drivers were big men—tough and whiskery and old hands at this game. Buck knew their names—Jack and Alex. Their load consisted of supplies for one of the local stores in Hardrock. It was a light load compared with the heavy pump on the wagons of Dunlap Stages.

"We've taked enough off you Dunlap men," Alex said surlily. "You kin swing around us."

"We can't take the chance," Buck said.

"Thet road won't slip," Jack said.

Buck said, "Look, fellas, look. . . . You only have to back up about a hundred feet and take that inside siding. There's no use us havin' trouble."

"Go around us, Dunlap men, and be damned."

Buck hit Alex in the jaw. He had a jaw about the size of that of a Berkshire hog—in fact, he was built along the lines of a fat porker. He threw up his forearm and hit, too. Buck connected and he missed. Buck moved forward, hit him again, and the wagon stopped Alex.

MacShane had knocked Jack down with one blow. Jack got out of the mud, blood on his lips, and he looked at Alex.

"These gents is too big for us," he said.

Alex said, "McKee, I'll get you for this!"

Buck said, "Come ahead, and finish it now. I don't want to kill you like I killed Kelly, but if you cross me I'll shoot you down—I'm gettin' tired of gettin' pushed around."

"No guns," Alex said hurriedly.

The Western Freight men backed on to the siding, and Buck and MacShane passed them, wheels roughlocked and sliding. MacShane had the Winchester .30-30 rifle across his thick thighs, and the Western Freight men saw the rifle and said nothing. Then they had slid past the rig and MacShane said, "I'll drop off here," and he went over the side, carrying the rifle. He walked behind the wagon, watching the Western Freight men, the rifle under his arm. He stayed there until the Western Freight rig had slipped over the sum-

mit and had fallen out of sight. Only then did he swing up on to the seat beside Buck.

"You'll have no more trouble with Alex," he told Buck.

"I hope not."

MacShane shook his head slowly. "There'll be no trouble, because Alex remembers Kelly."

Buck could only nod and hope the big man was right. MacShane seemed to have already forgiven him for breaking his whisky bottle. The man was turning out to be a good friend, and that seemed odd—Buck remembered the day he had hit MacShane, and MacShane had gone against the wall of the Hardrock Café, blood on his face. Had MacShane overlooked that blow? It didn't seem in the big man's nature to forget something so insulting and personal. Yet here he was, a friend of his. . . . Buck debated about this for a moment. Then, finding no answer, he let the question run into space, deciding that more time would perhaps answer it successfully and fully.

They had to do a lot of work before they got on the flat north of Phoenix. They rough-locked with chains, then took off the chains on level ground; they used their brakes, and Buck skinned mules with all the skill he had. The load creaked, once it swayed precariously; the chains held, though. Then, about three in the afternoon, they were out of the mountains, and Phoenix was ahead.

MacShane said, "Can I buy a bottle in town, Mother?"

Buck was so glad to be on the level ground with the load that he said, "Sure you can, son. And Mama will even buy you a quart."

"Oh, thanks, Mother."

They got the wagons paralleling the railroad tracks, and from then on it was the job of the railroad crew to load the pump on to a flat car. They did this with a steam crane and jacks. Buck and MacShane ate and the roustabouts changed mules and then loaded the two wagons with supplies for the commissary at the Lucky Belle Mine. They left Phoenix at

dusk, and when they reached the mountain grades the rain was falling again.

"I love the rain," MacShane snarled, and he took a drink.

"We need more of it," Buck said ironically.

They made an uneventful run into Hardrock. Although the trail uphill was slippery, their load was light compared to the one they had taken down-grade to the railroad junction. Hours went by and rain fell. Finally the lights of Hardrock could be seen, looking like fireflies against the side of the dark mountain. Buck was cold to the marrow of his bones, his mules were sullen and stubborn; MacShane sang in a false key, the whisky in him and warming him. Buck took a drink from the bottle, and MacShane killed it and threw it away into the night. They heard it break in the darkness, the sound sharp and metallic. Buck said, "To hell with LaMarr. Let him smell whisky on our breaths."

"He cain't smell it, Buck. He's got too much on his own breath to smell whisky on us."

"Hardrock, at last."

They stopped in front of the office. A skinner would take the load up the hill to the mine. Spider LaMarr sat at the desk despite the late hour. He had a quart of whisky ahead of him and he worked on books. He said, "Take a drink, men, and drink deep."

They drank.

LaMarr said, "I suppose you've already heard the news, eh?"

"What news?" Buck asked.

"When you pulled out this morning you probably saw Ma Jorgenson sitting at her desk, didn't you?"

Buck remembered seeing the woman there, her head on the desk. "She was asleep," he said, studying his boss. "Why mention that, LaMarr?"

"She wasn't asleep, Buck. She was dead. She had just shot herself through the head!"

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

MARSHAL WHITE was pompous and busy. This was a big event in his life—one of the local celebrities had committed suicide. There was, of course, a coroner's inquest, and by chance Buck got appointed on the jury of six men. The inquest was held at the Broken Lily Saloon, the biggest establishment in town. Questions were asked, certain points established; Buck and his fellow-jurymen filed out and held a brief meeting in a room. Buck was appointed foreman, and the jury decided on a verdict of "suicide". There was no other verdict to be handed down. Ma Jorgenson had left a brief letter behind. She could not stand the expense of going through a costly court procedure, she suffered from some hidden disease nobody knew she had—so, she had killed herself.

Nita inherited the stage-line, lock and stock and barrel. Relatives of the dead man—the one killed in the stage-coach wreck—decided not to sue the stage-coach line, for the line, the attorneys said, was almost broke. They might have been able to get a judgment against Ma, but now Ma Jorgenson was with Kelly and there was little percentage to be gained by suit. Therefore all the impending suits were dropped by the request of the injured passengers or their living relatives.

Everybody agreed that the dropping of the suits was a good bit of news for Nita, now that she had the management and ownership of Western Freight. The local attorney had passed around to the jury the note that Ma Jorgenson had left behind her. She had had it lying on the desk beside her. The words were printed by hand, and Buck looked at them rather carefully before passing the note on to the man at his left.

He had also seen Ma Jorgenson's corpse. He and the rest

of the jury had viewed the remains as it lay on the morgue-slab. Ma had been shot from below the right ear, and the bullet had done some dirty work as it tore out the top of her head. Powder-burns showed on her ear and the side of her skull.

The gun, Buck reasoned, had been placed close to her skull; in fact, the barrel had almost touched her skin and hair.

So the verdict was "suicide".

"Well, if Ma was the one what was causin' our misery, she won't cause us no more," Spider LaMarr said.

"That's right," Barrel MacShane chimed in.

Buck lay on the office bunk on his side, smoking a Bull Durham cigarette. Outside water ran off the eaves. He and Barrel were leaving in the morning with the other pump. He had small appetite for the job. But when you work for a company you do as ordered, or you quit.

"I feel sorry for the girl," LaMarr said. "That a chore for a young woman. Hard work for a man, even."

"She'll git by," Barrel MacShane said, scowling deeply. "Thet gal's got a sharp tongue an' a sharp brain."

"That ain't all she's got." LaMarr laughed quietly. "She's got a build almost as good as that one my girl has."

Buck blew smoke. He had to hide his smile. Old Hank Dunlap, had he heard this man say those words, would have gone for his gun! Poor LaMarr, he was due for a rude awakening, one of these days!

"How you gettin' along with Matt?" Buck asked innocently.

"All right, I guess. . . . Man never can tell about a woman, though. Well, we gotta get the stage out inside of twelve minutes, an' the waitin'-room is full of people." LaMarr lifted himself to his spidery length and went into the adjoining barn. Buck killed his cigarette.

"Out of tobacco."

"I got some in the drawer."

"Rough cut," Buck said. "I'll take Durham. Amble down to the saloon an' buy me a package, I guess."

He went to the Broken Lily, noticed Matt sitting at a far table, and then he crossed the sawdust strip and went up the stairs to the hall. Nobody was in the hall, so he boldly entered Matt's room and sat down. Within a half-hour she entered, and within another hour Tortilla Joe sneaked in. Buck had gone to sleep in the chair. Matt had sat silently, not wanting to disturb him. Buck smiled at her when Tortilla Joe shook him awake.

"Guess I'm an old man, Matt—goin' to sleep every time I set down. But I been missin' the beds a number of nights now, settin' on thet high, cold seat with the wind and rain howlin'."

"Poor Buck!" Her tone was jokingly mocking.

Buck found himself admiring her very much. She was faithful and she was kind, and she was true to the man she loved—the man who was flat on his back up in Wyoming. She was the kind of a woman Buck would marry . . . if he ever got married. And if he could find a duplicate.

"What we talks about?" Tortilla Joe asked, looking from one to the other, his dark eyes sharp.

Buck said, "Ma Jorgenson didn't kill herself."

Both looked at him. Tortilla Joe's eyes were round, his mouth was slightly open; he swallowed, his Adam's Apple bobbing like a floater on a fish-line. Matt Dunlap's eyes narrowed slowly and her lips became hard.

"I was—wondering about that, Buck."

"Why you say that?"

Buck said, "She left a note. It was hand-printed. The sign that was on me when I came to in thet alley was hand-printed. The note in Matt's room here was hand-printed. I saw that note Ma left. Unless I'm wrong, the same hand printed that which printed these other two signs."

"Oh, I see," Matt Dunlap murmured.

"Maybe Ma do the dirty work to you two," Tortilla Joe said. "She might hand-print all the signs. That no mean she not keel herself, doesn't it?"

"You kinda got the English language mixed up," Buck

reminded, "but we know what you mean, anyhow. You got a point there. But I still don't think Ma bumped herself off. She ain't the kind thet would do such a thing."

Tortilla Joe scowled. "Me, I theenk so, too. Then who shoot her, Buckshots?"

Buck said, "I've got my suspicions. Maybe I'm all wrong. Somebody wants Western Freight, and they also want Dunlap Stages." He changed the subject suddenly. "Where does Old Hank's boy go to college?"

Matt studied him. "Why ask that?"

"I've got a reason. What college does he go to?"

She told him.

Tortilla Joe dug in his coat pocket and came out with something wrapped in an old newspaper. With much ado he unwrapped a fresh *tortilla*. His white teeth made crunchy sounds as he started to eat.

"Me, thees I do not understands," he said, and shrugged.

"Me either," Matt Dunlap had to agree.

Buck said, "I don't want to act mysterious, but I have an idea. For some days now I've mulled it over, and now I think it's purty strong. Old Hank's boy—what's his name?"

"Lincoln."

"Oh, yeah, Lincoln. Matt, have you ever seen him?"

"No."

"You no see him ever?" Tortilla Joe asked, jaw open and mouth filled with *tortilla* crust. "No time you see heem, Matt?"

She explained. She and Old Hank had been married only two years. Lincoln had worked summer vacations back east and had not attended their wedding. He was due home in the spring with his diploma. "That is, next spring," she clarified. "Why do you ask about him, Buck?"

"I got reasons."

Tortilla Joe chewed. "Mans of mysteries," he said.

Buck walked the floor. He moved to the window, opened

the curtain a little, and looked out at the office of Western Freight. Hardrock still had plenty of citizens attempting to wear out the plank sidewalks. Buck spoke without looking at Matt and Tortilla Joe.

"Greenshade?" he asked. "How about Greenshade?"

Matt frowned in puzzlement. "Who is he?"

"The old *hombre*," Tortilla Joe supplied. "The one what would not let us into your office een Denver, Matts. The one weeth the green eyeshade."

"Oh, my secretary. What about him, Buck?"

"You said you were going to fire him. Did you?"

Matt smiled. "No, he came back; we settled our little trouble amiably. I couldn't fire him. When Lincoln was a small boy, Greenshade, as you call him, used to be a sort of male companion for him. He thinks the world of Lincoln."

Buck nodded.

There was a silence broken only by the seep of voices through the floor. Buck speared his hat from the rack.

"Have to go," he said.

Tortilla Joe grabbed him. "Why all the questions, Buckshots?"

Buck said, "Use your brain, Tortilla. Work this out for yourself. I'm not tipping my hand yet. I might be miles off, for all I know. I'm addin' this to this, and I might have the answer."

"I don't follow you one foot," Matt Dunlap said, watching him. "After all, Buck, you're working for me."

"You don't hire my thoughts," Buck said meaningly.

Her face went bleak, and Buck guessed at her anger. But she kept it leashed, and her face softened, her voice was sweet with sarcasm.

"All right, Sherlock."

Tortilla Joe said, "Sherlock? Who ees he? I never have heard——"

Buck went down the hall, smiling to himself. This time he did not go to the alley stairway. He had had too much

trouble back in that alley. He went to the bar and ordered a small beer.

"You got a girl up there, Buck?" the proprietor asked, making a head-motion toward the stairs.

Buck smiled over his beer-mug. "I might have . . . at that. A man can never tell, you know."

"You had a run-in with a Western Freight man, I understand."

The man's voice was very low. Something in it made Buck give him a penetrating glance.

"Guy name of Alex. Why?"

The man said, slowly, "Look in the backbar mirror, Buck." He moved down the bar, polishing a beer glass.

Buck glanced into the high mirror. Alex was coming behind him. Their eyes met in the mirror, and Buck showed a tight smile. Evidently the smile angered the Western Freight man, for he doubled his fists. Buck waited and Alex came closer, and black rage was scrawled across his face now. Buck wondered if the man were not a little drunk. He noticed that Alex packed a gun. It looked awkward on the mule-skinner's hip—a big black-handled .45. He even had it tied down with a thong around his thick thigh. This made Buck smile—a tie-down string was the sign of the amateur. Alex stopped behind him, and his voice was savage as he said, "Turn around, McKee."

Buck said, "Gladly," and he turned swiftly.

Alex again threw up a forearm—but again he was too late. Buck's left hit him flatly on the jaw and jarred him to the ankles. It jarred Buck, too; this mule-skinner had a jaw of steel. Alex hit at him. It was a wild blow, hastily flung, and Buck caught it with his elbow. His right cross came in.

Alex took it on the jaw.

Alex walked backwards, hands flailing. He seemed to be trying to grab a handhold on air. The crowd split behind him, and Alex hit the wall. Buck had followed him, and two right hooks dumped Alex into the sawdust. Alex was sleeping soundly.

Buck stopped, fists doubled, breathing hard. A hand came on his shoulder, and he turned and looked into the thin face of Marshal White.

"You in trouble . . . again, McKee?"

Buck looked inquiringly at the owner of the Broken Lily.

"This Western Freight man picked the trouble," the proprietor said. "He swung first from behind McKee, and McKee only pertected himself, marshal."

White nodded, eyes sombre.

Buck said, "Get your hand off my shoulder."

White didn't move his hand.

"Get your hand off me," Buck repeated.

White said, "Don't get tough with me."

Buck hacked the marshal across the wrist. He hit with a savage and bitter force, and he almost snapped White's wrist.

"Marshal, this gent will try to kill me. I'm telling you here and now that if he jumps me again I'm killing him. You'd best float him out of town if you want to keep him alive."

"You sound tough."

Buck said, "I've been pushed around for the last time in this town. I'm peaceful until they throw trouble at me, and they've throwed trouble at me, savvy." His eyes were level with those of the lawman. His smile was slow and sardonic. "How is your wrist?"

White said, "Forget my wrist."

Buck walked away. Nita met him and took his arm and said, "Alex had it coming. I heard about your trouble on the grade with him. You were right."

"Who told you about it?"

She seemed to hesitate, then she said, "Barrel MacShane told me."

They went out of the Broken Lily.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

BUCK and Barrel MacShane did not freight out another big pump. Something happened at the mine that made it more imperative that a smaller pump be hauled out from Phoenix, where it was on siding on a flat-car. Buck therefore did not need Barrel MacShane along, so the next day he pulled out with four mules and a wagon loaded with a light haul of household goods, for one of the mine superintendents was being transferred to another job.

The rain was still with him.

On the edge of town, Nita Jorgenson came out of the brush, and caught his wagon. He did not stop to let her climb on to the seat. She wore levis and she slung up a slim leg and was beside him.

"Phoenix, sir," she said, smilingly.

Buck said, "Phoenix it is, and where is your fare?"

She smiled and moved closer to him. "Thought I'd like to ride a trip with you. That office can almost run itself and, besides, my book-keeper is there. I'll catch the stage back."

"Ride back with me if you want to."

"Too slow and too cold, because you'll come back in the dark."

They chatted about irrelevant matters. Buck knew that the girl had some hidden reason for riding with him—she had another reason besides accompanying him for the ride. Tortilla Joe passed them on Ryder Summit, swinging his fast stage around the slower mules, and he lifted his hand to Nita. Apparently he did not see Buck, and this made Buck smile tightly.

Then the stage was out of sight in the mist, hurrying downgrade for Phoenix and the railroad junction.

She asked many questions.

Buck always kept conversation away from her dead mother. He answered the questions sometimes; other times, he evaded them. She sat very close to him. Rain brought out the sweet aroma of her healthy hair, and he liked the feel of her against him, even though both wore yellow rain-coats. They ate dinner at Half-way House—an early dinner—and they got into Phoenix at one. Again the sun was bright in the valley, while the mountains were clothed with rain-clouds and mist. Buck thought of Charlie's Place, and of Old Messilla, and the Rio Grande.

This thing, he decided, would be over inside of a few days, if things went his way. It all depended upon the actions of one man.

"Me to visit a girl friend," Nita said, as Buck pulled his mules to a halt beside a flat-car. "Thanks, Buck. The stage back for little Nita."

"You can ride with me, Nita."

"I don't trust you in the dark, Buck."

She laughed, waved to him, and went toward the main street. Buck turned his team over to a roustabout and hurried toward a saloon. Tortilla Joe was drinking *tequilla*, and Buck moved close and murmured something. Tortilla Joe listened, mouth opened a little, then he nodded; he left his place at the bar and went into the street. Buck had a sandwich and a beer. He waited about ten minutes, and Tortilla Joe came in. He ordered a sandwich and he said quietly, "She go to depot. She send a telegram, Buck. Me, thees I do not understand, no?"

"You will," Buck murmured.

Buck loafed around, although his rig was ready to move. The stage left at two-thirty, and he watched passengers load. Nita went into the stage. Then it was gone, with dark Tortilla Joe on the box, tug chains jangling. Buck went to the depot and waited until he was the only occupant beside the telegrapher. He went to the window.

"Ticket somewhere, fellow?"

Buck said, "There was a girl in here a while ago. Nita Jorgenson."

"Yes."

"You know Nita?"

"I do. She owns Western Freight."

Buck nodded. "She sent a telegram. I want to see that telegram. I understand you make a copy of every telegram sent out. So it should be on the hook over there, eh?"

"You can't see the carbon."

"Why not?"

"Railroad company law. If I let you see it I'd lose my job. Such things are confidential."

"You won't let me read it?"

"I can't."

"I think you can, fella."

The man looked into the bore of Buck McKee's .45. His lips trembled slightly. "You're breaking the law."

Buck said, "That telegram, please."

He cocked the .45. The sound was a loud click. The telegrapher reached over and got the telegram and Buck said, "That's a good boy." He holstered his gun and got a pencil and pad and copied the telegram word for word. The man watched, tongue touching his lips occasionally, for his lips seemed dry.

Buck said, "Here, fella," and he dug a twenty-dollar gold piece out of his wallet. "This can make you forget, can't it?"

The pale eyes lighted. "It sure can. You're Buck McKee, ain't you? Trouble shooter for Dunlap Stages?" The eyes dwelled on the gold piece with loving attention.

"I am, sir. Now, I want to send some telegrams. One, to start with."

"At your pleasure, Mr. McKee."

Laboriously Buck wrote his message. Then the telegrapher tapped it out rapidly. Finished, he looked at Buck.

"Another one, sir?"

"Maybe later."

Buck had to wait an hour before he got a return. He read the message twice, and put it in his pocket after carefully folding it. He buttoned down the flap of his inside pocket to make sure he would not lose the message. He looked at the operator with a whimsical smile.

"You going to report me for pullin' thet gun on you?"

"What gun, sir? I saw no gun."

Buck smiled. "A good boy. . . . Keep this to yourself. A lot depends on it, and many thanks to you. Well, I see my wagon is loaded; time I move into the rainy belt again. Adios."

"So long, Buck."

They had the pump loaded and the log-chains jacked down tightly across it. Fresh mules dozed in the sun, some standing hip-humped, others merely loafing. Buck inspected his load. It was placed properly, with the weight equally distributed on the wheels and, by these tokens, should ride properly. Chains were solid and strong, and he inspected them with meticulous thoroughness. A load like this, if it slipped due to a broken chain, could drag the driver and mules into a canyon, and it would be quite a wreck. The links of the chains, though, were complete and unmarred; the chains were anchored solidly to running-gear—the rig was ready to roll. He did not use a jerk-line with only four mules, for he had two teams strung out, and he took his lines and went on to the seat, settling down for the long trip up the mountain to Hardrock.

"What became of the girl friend?" a man jokingly asked.

"She got married on me," Buck joked back. "Stayin' in town with her new husband. See you next time, men."

"Got the big pump coming," the man said. "Be here tomorrow, they tell me. Be quite a chore loading it."

"We'll get it."

Mules moved against collars, the wheels turned slowly. Buck crossed the railroad tracks and took the long road toward the snow-tipped peaks. They moved across a huge alluvial cone of decomposed granite, and this made for firm

footing. They were ants crawling across the huge expanse of the Arizona desert. Here were *ocotillo* and century plants and cacti. Sand lizards scurried across the road and once he saw a Gila Monster. Again, in the far distance, a coyote moved along the base of a rocky hill, smelling under rocks for lizards and mice. He was careful and wise, and he kept beyond the range of the Winchester .30-30 rifle that rode in the boot nailed to the side of the wagon. They came to the up-light, and the hard drag began. They went upward, meeting a Dunlap Stages stage-coach, and they went into siding for three Western Freight wagons. One of the skimmers told him that Alex had been paid off by Nita and had left the country. Buck nodded and said nothing, for Nita had told him this on the way down.

He found himself thinking of Nita.

For obvious reasons, the memory of the girl irked him, and he did not want to think of her. She was smart and wily and a woman, and she was quick to use a woman's arts; she was, he decided, a master in the field of deception. There were quite a few people involved in this, and to some it would be a hard blow. To Old Hank Dunlap it would be a tough jolt; to Matt Dunlap also. But Buck had the key to the whole thing now, and he knew it would now work itself out. What the ultimate conclusion would be he was not absolutely certain. Time would tell these things.

He had the information needed to bring this nefarious deal to an end. But how could he go about making that evidence strong enough to stand up in court? He remembered the powder-burns on Ma Jorgenson's head. Maybe somebody would hang for murder? That was possible and logical.

It was dark when he reached Half-way House. He was cold from the rain and the chilly wind that swept across this Arizona high country. He dismounted with a slowness caused by cold flesh and cold bones, throwing his reins over to the hostler. He went into the cheery restaurant and ordered a meal and drank three cups of hot coffee right away.

"You look cold," a man said.

He sat next to Buck. He had on an overcoat that had seen better days, and through its unbuttoned front Buck saw a thread-bare blue suit and a white silk shirt that needed washing. The man looked like he was down on his luck.

Buck said, "Eat on me, friend."

"Well, now——"

Buck spoke to the girl waitress. "Feed the man, lady."

The man said, "Thanks, skinner," and ordered.

He ate like he had a grudge against the food. Evidently he had not eaten for a long, long time. Buck glanced at a black suitcase that was on the floor beside the man's feet. Beside it was another black box that looked like a camera.

"You a drummer?" Buck asked.

"No, I'm a photographer. I got on the stage, but the Mexican threw me off here because I ran out of change. An unfortunate circumstance, you know. I'm heading for Hard-rock to open a studio."

"You ought to have good business there. No other picture-taker in the town, to the best of my knowledge." Buck did some thinking as he cut his steak. "I'm going that way. You can ride with me on the wagon. Be about eleven when we get there, though, and a cold ride, Mister——"

"Webster, sir."

"McKee's my handle. You any relation to the gink that wrote the dictionary? He sure made my grammar-school days miserable."

"Oh, Lord, no! Don't blame that on me too, please!"

Buck smiled and cut another slab of steak. He was thawing out a little. Rain pounded against the big windows and the wind talked in the eaves.

"It'll be a cold, wet ride," Buck reminded.

Webster said, "I gotta get there, McKee."

Buck drank more coffee and then the roustabout came in, water dripping from his rain-coat, to say the mules were hitched and ready to go. Buck paid and looked at Webster, who picked up his bags.

"I have to keep these dry," he said. "My camera and developing equipment. I can cover them with my coat until we reach the rig. You got a tarp over your load?"

"I'll lift the corner of it," Buck said. "Wait until I call for you, and you come on the run."

"Okay."

Buck went into a rainy-wild night. He bent against the force of the wind, the rain slashing him. Mules stood in the lamplight from the windows, and they were ugly and humped against the elements, ears laid back. The hostler had hung a lantern from the ring on the neck-yoke that connected the first two mules, and this made a wobbling and uncertain light. There was also a lantern hung to the rear of the wagon, and it had a red globe.

He untied a corner of the tarp, made room for Webster's baggage, and then hollered for the photographer to come. Webster hurried into the rain, bent over to further protect his equipment; Buck helped him put it in safe and dry storage. Webster tied down the corner of the tarp.

"That'll keep them dry," Webster panted, going up beside Buck on the seat. "Man, what a wicked night!"

"The inside of a black hat."

The mules moved ahead, glad to be moving, for they had got cold. They rolled across the valley and the creek ran bank full. They forded it, but the ford was easy, for the bottom was gravel, and therefore substantial. Then the first rise seemed to come out and meet them. Occasionally the storm-clouds broke and showed a high moon, that was soon again obscured by scurrying wild clouds. Buck had bought a pint bottle at Half-way House. Spider LaMarr had ordered that there be no drinking while on shift. Buck deliberately disregarded that order. If things worked right, within a few days he would not be hired by Dunlap Stages. To hades with that long-gearred Spider LaMarr! He handed the bottle to Webster.

"Uncork it, friend, and drink hearty."

Webster said, "Whisky," and his voice was very glad.

Despite his cold hands, it did not take him long to jerk out the cork. Whisky made him talkative. He wanted to do something for Buck, something nice—some great favour. Buck had fed him, was giving him a ride to Hardrock, and Buck was letting him drink with him. Buck said, "Maybe some day we can arrange something for you to do," and he said it to placate the man, to give him some encouragement.

"Hope that time is soon."

The hills came to them, were conquered; two stages met them, one passed them. Stage lights winked into the distance, and rain and the night held them. Webster had been in Old Messilla, he had got drunk at Charlie's Place—he talked about Las Cruces and El Paso. Buck gave him money enough to get a room at the hotel and helped him from the load. Webster sang in an off-pitch key, and Buck carried his bags to the hotel. The clerk put Webster to bed.

"He's dead drunk," the clerk said.

"Lucky stiff!"

"Why is he lucky?"

"He got drunk on about half a pint. Takes me a full quart. Think of the money he saves."

A roustabout took over the wagon. Buck headed toward the office of Dunlap Stages. What the heck were these fools doing out on this rainy street at this hour of the night? The good lord was kind enough to put out the sun so they could sleep in the dark, and now they violated the dark.

A woman said, "So you got back, Buck?"

He turned. "Hello, Nita. Up late?"

"A business woman now, Buck. Night and day, day and night."

She stood close to him, and they were under the wooden awning of the Mercantile Store. Lamplight showed her lovely, dark face. Buck put his arm around her and kissed her. He kissed her long, and he put the right emphasis in it. Finally they broke and her eyes were mysterious.

"Buck, you old flirt!"

A voice said, "What goes on there?"

Buck turned, irritation grooving his face. He had expected the voice to belong to Marshal White. But it did not belong to White. It belonged to huge-chested Barrel MacShane.

“What does it mean to you, MacShane?”

MacShane, looking at Nita, said, “I was just joking.”

But he wasn't joking, and they all knew it. Buck said, “Me to bed,” and he left Nita and MacShane standing there. Once he looked back. They were talking and he wished, suddenly, he knew the nature of their conversation.

He turned into the door of Dunlap Stages.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

THEY held a council of war that morning in the room of Matt Dunlap, alias Matt Watson. Buck explained his plan, and based future action on what he had gradually learned during his stay in this wild boom town. Matt Dunlap listened, head in her hands, moodily regarding the floor. Tortilla Joe chewed a cold *tortilla* and occasionally cursed in Mexican. Matt did not know Mexican; therefore she did not understand his words. She was lucky. Buck understood them.

"That's the way things stack up," Buck said, upon finishing.

"Tough," Tortilla Joe murmured.

Matt said, "Well, if it has to be, it has to be. Maybe some-way I can protect old Hank, but just now I don't know how that will be brought about."

Buck glanced at her and thought, *Good woman, always thinking first of her man.* "Yes, it will be tough on Ol' Hank," he said. "Hell!" He spat. "Well, to work. You each know what you have to do. Now don't fall down in your duties."

"We won't," Tortilla Joe assured.

Matt only nodded.

Buck went downstairs to the saloon. Marshal White sidled up to him and told him Alex had left town. Buck merely nodded. The marshal kept on watching him. Buck thought of the records buried under the floor of the out-building, and he smiled.

White asked, "What's so funny, McKee?" He thought Buck was laughing at him. Buck made his face very sober.

"Just my thoughts. One of my mules kicked at an ol' gal down in Phoenix yesterday—this society dame jumped me about how terrible it was to work a mule so hard and she

went to pet the ol' jassax and he lambasted at her with a hind hoof. Almost clipped her, too. She took it on the run to git away."

"That ain't funny."

Buck eyed the lawman with a steady gaze. "It is to me. Some of us have different ideas about things, I reckon. Me, I figure that ol' dame got what she had comin'."

"I don't."

Buck smiled.

Marshal White walked away, his back stiff as a poker. He had a one-tracked mind, and Buck had derailed his locomotive. Buck drank a beer he did not want and ate a sandwich he wanted. The proprietor talked a little with him. Things had changed in the freighting line since Buck had come to Hardrock. Ma Jorgenson was dead, her daughter ran the outfit, and the mine superintendents had got together and had issued an ultimatum to Dunlap Stages.

"A—*what*?"

"A warnin'."

"Oh, I see, now. What kind of a warnin', friend?"

If Dunlap Stages lost another bit of freight due to wreckage, each of the mines was pulling its freighting away from that concern, transferring it to Western Freight. Nita had spent most of the day up on the hill talking with the two superintendents.

"But Western Freight has had wrecks, too."

"Not as bad or as often as Dunlap Stages," the man said, wiping the bar. "They've wrecked a lot of machinery for the mines. Some has been insured, of course, but when you collect insurance you never get the full amount, an' you get it late . . . if ever. I mind the time my brother died up in Montany. I had a heck of a darn long time collectin' his insurance—wasn't much: five hundred bucks——"

But Buck wasn't listening. He was going down Main Street for the office of Dunlap Stages. There was a new tent pitched beside the saloon. Photographer Webster stood in the doorway.

Buck stopped, looked at the tent, then at Webster. "You in business already?"

"Already made ten bucks. Come on in and I'll take a picture of you, Buck."

"Oh, no!"

"Why not? For free."

Buck joked, "Some lawman might see it and recognize me."

Webster thought he was joking. Buck acted as though he were joking. But Webster did not know just how much truth the careless statement did possess.

"Come in and look at my equipment."

Buck ducked through the flap and entered the tent. It had ground for a floor and a sooty-chimneyed kerosene lamp hung from the ridge-pole, a length of young pine. He didn't know a thing about photography beside the fact it was a good job here. Three hundred per is nothing to sneeze at.

"Here is my camera——" The man went on and on, and Buck listened respectfully.

When he had finished Buck said, "I might have a job for you later on."

"What kind of a job?" The man was suspicious.

Buck smiled. "Not any hard work, Webster. Rest your mind on that point. I might want you to take some pictures, though."

Webster's doubt left. "I'll be glad to help you, McKee. You helped me when I needed a hand."

"I'll remember that."

Buck went to the office of Dunlap Stages. Barrel MacShane sat on a stool, legs spread wide, and his eyes regarding his muddy boots. He lifted his shaggy head and said, "Howdy, McKee." Buck nodded and looked at Spider LaMarr. The man's long and homely face seemed longer and homelier than ever.

"You lose your last friend, LaMarr?"

LaMarr looked at him with dull and thoughtless eyes.

"It's all over town. I suppose you heard about it in the saloon."

Buck played ignorant. "About what?"

Spider LaMarr repeated what the saloon-keeper had told Buck. "If this load gets wrecked it means no more shippin' from either mine—either from here to Phoenix, or from Phoenix out to Hardrock."

"Nita Jorgenson is behind that," Buck said. "She's turned them big eyes on those two ol' married men, and they've prob'ly wanted to desert their wives and kids, even. Hard to fight a woman, Spider—'specially one as purty as she is. Ma, she was different—she had a face that would make a clock revolve its hands the wrong direction."

"I dunno about Nita riggin' this up," Barrel MacShane grumbled. "Seems to me she's the type what would fight fair regardless of whether or not she wears petticoats."

"She wears levis," Buck pointed out, and smiled. Barrel MacShane sure defended Nita Jorgenson at the drop of a hat. "And she looks right purty in them, too. You been shinin' up to her, Barrel?"

"She wouldn't have me," Barrel muttered. Despite his allegations, he glanced upward at Buck, and Buck pretended not to see the glance—it was suspicious and wicked and ugly. Buck looked at Spider LaMarr.

"We pull that old pump out come mornin', Spider?"

Spider nodded. "To Phoenix it goes, Buck. Then you come back with the new one. They both have to get here and there okay and all in one piece, savvy?"

"Barrel an' me will get them through."

Spider LaMarr shook his head. "You might, but Barrel isn't goin' this trip. I'm ridin' on the high seat aside you, McKee."

Barrel looked at his boss with his eyebrows pulled down. "How come I don't go? I was top skinner here afore this McKee button showed up. I can still skin mules better'n him."

"I'm skinnin' them," Spider LaMarr said. He held out

his bony, long hands. "These little hands is holdin' thet jerk-line. An' McKee here is holdin' on to somethin' else——"

"What?" Buck wanted to know.

Spider turned quickly on him. His sunken eyes glowed with an unholy fire. "You'll be hangin' on to a Winchester .30-30 rifle, McKee!"

Barrel MacShane growled, "I'm as good a shot as McKee. I challenge him to a shootin' match."

LaMarr's voice held a dangerous edge. "Lissen, Barrel. Quit the kid stuff, savvy? The chips are down. We need you here more than on the road, too. We need a good hand here at the office to get stages out on time, to get the skinners lined up on their chores. I know you're a good shot. But I need you here, savvy? That clear? Speak up!"

Barrel MacShane looked down again at his boots. For some moments he sat like that—leonine head down, enormous shoulders hunched. Buck watched him and had his thoughts. He had not expected LaMarr to ride with him on the loaded wagon. He had expected that once again Barrel MacShane would be his seat-partner. This put a new angle on to this affair. This called for other plans. Or did it? Buck said nothing, and LaMarr watched Barrel MacShane.

Without looking up, MacShane said, "Okay, LaMarr, okay. I jumped my handle too fast." He looked up at Buck then. "Accept my apologies, McKee? Too much temper, I guess."

"Accepted."

Barrel MacShane lumbered to his feet. "Gotta go back and check them mules. That coloured boy is gettin' too flip. He don't feed stock as much oats as he used to. I might have to run him off the job, boss."

"Run him off if he doesn't do his work. Send him to me and I'll give him his time. We gotta keep this outfit in business, and we gotta get back showing a profit. I got a good job here. Four hundred per is nothin' to sneeze at."

"He get snooty with me and I'll run him off," MacShane promised.

He went out the rear door into the tramped area of the compound and headed for the barn. Back in the blacksmith shop somebody pounded loudly on a piece of steel. Buck figured the smith was evidently shrinking a tyre-rim. This sound mingled with that of the crowd and lost its identity. Rigs came and went, driving the ruts deeper into the Arizona soil, and people moved back and forth—miners with lunch-pails, children heading for the school, and other town denizens. Buck said nothing, and Spider LaMarr sank even deeper into his wide chair, and he too was silent. Buck asked, then, "We leave in the morning?"

"At daybreak, Buck."

"Wish this rain would stop. Just for a day, anyway, and give us a break. We could use a drier road, boss."

"We might have some luck."

Buck went to the bunkhouse. He played cards for a while and ate at the Hardrock and joked with Elsie. She seemed very congenial. Already her personality failed to affect him. He tired easily of women, and he had no further designs on her. She seemed to suspect this, and her glance was shrewd.

"Are you—well, Buck?"

"I think so," he said, smilingly. "I'm not sure."

"Are you *alive*?"

"I think so."

"You don't know?"

"I'll pinch myself and find out."

She hurried away to wait on two miners who had just entered. Buck noticed she wore a frown, though. She gave him a quick glance as he went out the door, and he pretended he did not notice. He returned to the bunkhouse through a driving rain. The main street was like a miniature lake. On the hill the stamps jarred and pounded as they crushed ore.

He stretched out on his bunk. Within a few moments he was asleep. He awakened at three and felt rested. Outside the rain dripped off the eaves, and a glance out the dirty

window angered him. He went to the office, where Spider LaMarr sat doing some book-keeping.

There was a pile of chains on the floor. Log-chains, with big links; a trusty pile of tough chains.

"For the pump?" Buck asked.

Spider LaMarr nodded.

Buck sat on the floor, cross-legged, and looked at the chains. He inspected each individual link. It was a slow and tiresome job, but he had to make sure. Spider glanced at him.

"Good idea, Buck."

Buck got to his feet. "Every link is okay. Keep these chains in your office tonight, eh?"

"They'll be under my bunk, right over there. And I'll be sleepin' damn' light on the bunk, too."

Buck went into the compound and spoke to Barrel MacShane, who was greasing a wagon with the aid of Cotton Top. "Which wagons is rollin' out tomorrow, Barrel?"

"This is one of them. The other is over there."

Buck inspected the wagon carefully. He checked the axles and the reach and the brakes. Then he checked the other wagon.

"The road is the thing a man has to worry about," MacShane said. "But you got the great Spider LaMarr himself handlin' jerk-line!" His voice was ironical.

"If you don't like it, why not quit the job?"

Barrel MacShane said, "What a smart boy you turned out to be, McKee!" Then to Cotton Top, "Give me that grease ladle, boy."

Buck winked at Cotton Top, who smiled widely behind Barrel MacShane's back. He went to the Broken Lily Saloon. He crowded in beside Matt Dunlap, who stood at the bar with a miner.

"Tomorrow mornin', Matt," he said quietly.

She nodded.

The bar-tender said, "Talkin' to me, Buck? What'd you say?"

"I'll take a beer. A short one."

CHAPTER NINETEEN

DAWN finally came and rain fell down. Sometimes it roared down in a cloudburst; gradually it tapered off to become a cold mist. Buck and Spider LaMarr moved the wagons up the hill before dawn. They had them chained together solidly, and the heavy plank platform was solidly bolted to the running-gear. They did not load the pump that was going to Phoenix. That was the job of the roustabouts at the mine. They drove into a long tin shed, and an overhead crane lifted the pump. Slowly it was lowered into the proper position on the wagons. Buck and Spider inspected the job and got the immense weight properly located on the running-gear. Then the chains were jacked down properly. The jacks tightened them with enormous pressure that anchored them solidly around the heavy pump. It took about an hour to load the pump. The foreman finally said, "There she is, men. Our hands will load the new one down at Phoenix on for you. We got a crew down there waitin' for you."

Again Spider LaMarr and Buck inspected the load and chains. Then Spider went up on the seat and got the jerk-line. "We rough-lock at the top of the hill, Buck. Damn this slant into town." They rough-locked their wheels with big log-chains, the knots at the bottom of the wheels so they would make a drag; they used brakes and the mules, and finally they were in front of the Hardrock Café. Dawn was still grey and vision a little bit obscured by the rain and the lack of daylight.

"Them chains is as tight as the strings on a fiddle," LaMarr said, uncoiling his length off the seat and stepping into the mud. "Well, we get some chuck, Buck, an' then we roll."

"Best wait for more daylight."

"Good idea. We'll kill a little time in here."

They had stopped the wagons directly in front of the café. Through the big window they could see one side of the load. Across the street was the tent of Webster. The flap was open a little at the top. Buck saw the snout of a camera sticking out a little, but he would not have seen it had not he looked for it. They ate with their eyes on their load. The street moved with people, a stage rocked in—Tortilla Joe, wet to the hide, handled the ribbons. It went around the corner and became lost from view.

Spider LaMarr consulted his pocket-watch. "Right on the dot, Buck. That Mex is a good skinner."

"I'd like to skin him."

LaMarr looked sidewise at him. "You two never did get along after that ruckus you had in this café, eh?"

"He kin stay on his side of the road," Buck said, "an' I'll stay on mine. These are fine hot-cakes, Elsie. Man who marries you will be a lucky stiff to get a breakfast like this each mornin'."

"I'm single, Buck," she said pointedly.

Buck had said the wrong thing. He put his entire attention on his breakfast. Elsie's face showed displeasure and she moved away.

"You said the wrong thing there," LaMarr said quietly.

"I gotta git outa this town, else I'll fin' myself married, and that won't be a good thing."

"There might be worse things."

"Like what, for instance?"

"Well, I popped the question to Matt, an' by golly she might accept me. She wants a few days to make up her mind."

Buck almost smiled. Matt Dunlap was really playing all the cards she owned! "She's a nice girl," Buck said.

They drank coffee and talked. Customers came and went. Elsie was busy. Dawn grew in volume and the rain fell back. Within thirty minutes the day was rather clear. Matt Dunlap came in. She wore a rain-coat that failed to hide the lines of her full figure. Spider LaMarr arose gallantly to the

occasion and insisted she and he sit in a booth. Buck could watch the rig. Buck said, "We're movin' that rig to Phoenix," and Matt nodded, for the words had a meaning to her that escaped Spider LaMarr. She and Spider went to a booth. Buck could not see them because the only available booth was to the back. Buck walked across the street and ducked into Webster's tent.

"Any luck, Webster?"

"Nobody touched your load from this side, Buck. I waited to snap a picture if anybody came close to it, but nobody touched it."

Buck nodded, busy with thoughts. "Thanks, chum. We roll in a little while, but keep your eye on it until we start wheels turnin', eh?"

"That'll be my job, McKee."

Buck returned to the café. Spider LaMarr had not even missed him. Buck said, "How about it, Spider?" and the tall man rose. "I'll see you when we get back, Matt."

"I sure wish you good luck," Matt said. "I know what this means to you boys. The whole town has talked about it——"

Spider LaMarr cut in impatiently with, "We'd best hit the trail, McKee." He spoke to Matt. "Good-bye, honey."

"Good-bye, Spider."

Spider walked ahead of Buck. Buck looked at Matt and she said, "Good luck, Buck." Buck nodded, and she nodded. Her hands were clenched and her white teeth grooved her bottom lip.

Spider climbed first on to the seat. Across the street was Tortilla Joe, standing in the shelter of a doorway. Buck lifted his hand slightly, and Tortilla Joe nodded. Then Buck was on the seat, and Spider LaMarr had the jerk-line.

"Hit them collars, mules!"

The mules moved against their collars, wanting to pull so they could get warm. Spider sat hunched over, jerk-line in hand. Buck looked at the handle of the .30-30 sticking out of the saddle-scabbard nailed to the seat at his left. Tortilla

Joe still watched them. Nita came out of the Western Freight office and said, "Good luck, men," and she waved.

Buck waved back, but Spider LaMarr apparently was busy with his jerk-line. He grumbled, "Think we was leavin' town for good the way they re yellin' at us. Get along, Jimmy boy."

Buck cursed the rain.

The going was slow because of the rain and the mud and the stiff hills. They had to rough-lock wheels, then take loose chains, then rough-lock again at the summit of another hill. Buck was wet and dirty and miserable and his boots didn't have human feet in them—they were packed with two lumps of ice. He worked with a grim savageness. His plans had gone haywire. He had expected somebody to try to cut part way through a few links on the chains when the wagons had been parked in front of the Hardrock Café. He had expected that somebody would sneak up from the off-side and try to weaken some chains. But nobody had tried this. Had they tried it, Webster would have snapped a picture of them at the job.

He knew that this load would never get to Phoenix if certain parties had their way. . . . They had not tried to weaken the chains. That meant, then, they would make another play, this one further on down the road. He had already made up his mind as to what form of deviltry that manœuvre would assume. The climax had come, and to win they had to hit this load and derail it.

"Gotta rough-lock again," LaMarr grunted.

They got the heavy log-chains loose and wrapped them around the wheels, then ran the free ends to the reach, where they were fastened solidly. This made the hind wheels skid, and on the bottom of each wheel, digging into the damp soil, was the huge knot made by the chain. Buck walked behind the load while Spider LaMarr made the mules put their rumps into the breeching to hold the load. The wagon skidded and made ruts behind it as it slowly went down the grade. Two Western Freight wagons were plodding across

the flat below. They stopped and went into siding, and Buck nodded.

"Cold as hell," a skinner called.

Another said, "Thet big pump is waitin' for you boys on the sidin' down in Phoenix. It'll be a load to take back on these roads. Chimney Butte grade is mighty slippery, men."

"You cheer us up a whale of a lot," LaMarr grunted.

"We'll make it," Buck said.

They reached the flat and took off the rough-lock chain. Again mules went against their collars.

Spider LaMarr looked at Buck. "How come you look back thataway, McKee? Lookin' at somethin'?"

"Yeah. . . . Lookin' at the rain."

Spider LaMarr showed a tight grin. "Don't need to look toward the brush to see rain, McKee. Rain is all around us."

Buck said nothing.

LaMarr spat. "Chimney Butte will be the tough grade."

"They'll all be tough, Spider."

They finally reached Half-way House. To LaMarr's surprise, Matt Dunlap was sitting at the long counter. How had she got there? She had ridden ahead of them. Spider expressed surprise: he had not seen her ride past their wagons. She had come on the stage.

"Why?"

"To keep check on you to see you got this far okay."

Spider LaMarr's dull eyes showed happy glints. Evidently, then, this woman loved him. He did not notice the wink that Matt Dunlap, alias Matt Watson, gave to Buck. They ate, and Spider LaMarr warmed up because Matt was beside him. Buck chewed his pie and almost smiled when he thought of the blow that was ahead of one Spider LaMarr when he found out that Matt Watson was really his boss—and already happily married.

"More coffee, Matt?" Spider asked.

"Spike it, Spider?"

The manager of Dunlap Stages shook his long head sadly. "No whisky on either of us, Matt. We never drink on shift.

But if you want a snort in your coffee——." He crooked a long finger toward the waitress who obliging spiked the coffee with a jigger of Old Handsome.

"Cold day," Matt said, sipping her drink.

"You going to catch the next stage into Phoenix, or going to catch one back to Hardrock?" Spider wanted to know.

Buck saw that Matt's smile was very coy. She was a very good actress. "I—I don't know, Spider. You want me to meet you in Phoenix? I can take the stage in from here."

"I'll meet you in Phoenix."

Their meals finished, Spider insisted on paying for all three dinners. Buck knew that if he and his boss had eaten alone Spider would not have paid for his, Buck's, dinner. But Matt was along, and Spider wanted to act like the big-push. Which was all right with Buck.

"See you in Phoenix, Matt."

Fresh mules had been hooked to the wagons. A Dunlap Stages hand had stood guard over the rig while Buck and Spider had been in Half-way House. Buck went into the seat, and Spider climbed up and took the jerk-line. Matt watched from the window, and Spider lifted a hand high.

She waved back.

"Get into them collars, you jassaxes!" Spider made his whip talk like mad over the backs of the wet mules. "Phoenix is ahead, an' she's down grade! Git a-movin', you long-eared sons of Satan!"

The wheels grudgingly moved, crunching on gravel. Spider LaMarr adjusted his skinny bulk on the seat and smiled. "Sure nice to see my Matt there, Buck. Wonderful woman. Gonna marry her if she'll stand still long enough!" It was supposed to be a joke. Buck obligingly smiled. Spider's homely face was very happy. "Git along thar, you jassax!"

Buck knew the road well now because he had travelled it so many times. They went into siding, and a Western Freight wagon, loaded with supplies for a store, went by, wheels rough-locked and sliding in the mud, the skinner

busy holding his wagon on the grade. He did not wave or say a word. He was very, very busy. They watched him until he reached the bottom of the hill, then they went on their way. They pulled to the summit and rough-locked again and went down the slope with sliding wheels. Buck kept watching the brush. Spider, who had his hands busy with his teams, did not notice Buck's sidewise glances.

The mind of the lanky cow-puncher was busy. He felt sure that this load was not destined to reach Phoenix without trouble. But where and how would trouble hit? That was the question.

"Rider behind us," Buck said.

They were on the summit of Frog Cut. Spider LaMarr turned quickly, looked hard, said, "That's Matt, ain't it?"

Buck played ignorant. "I dunno. It couldn't be Matt. What would she be doing here——? It is Matt!"

Matt Dunlap rode a sorrel gelding. She did not ride side-saddle; she sat a man's saddle. Lanky Spider LaMarr stared at her. She had a rifle under her leg, the Winchester snug and dry in a leather saddle-scabbard.

"What the heck you doin' here, Matt?" Spider asked excitedly.

She had worried about them. So she had rented a horse at Half-way House and had got a rifle and had followed them. She had intended to just lag behind and watch their back-trail and she had unexpectedly ridden upon them. Spider LaMarr believed this. He was very happy.

"Gosh! I'm sure glad you thought enough of me to want to watch out for me, Matt. That sure is thoughtful of you."

Buck saw his opportunity. "You ride with Spider on the seat, Matt. I'll take your bronc and ride behind you a mile or so, but I'll always keep you in sight. From here on in it ain't too steep, Spider, except for Chimney Butte grade, and I can catch you and help you rough-lock the wheels there, if you want me to."

"I can rough-lock them. Good idea, McKee." Spider LaMarr gladly helped Matt up on the seat and climbed up

himself. "You mosey along behind us, McKee, an' keep in rifle range of us, savvy?"

"I sure will."

Buck held in his horse. Slowly the rig crept forward. Matt moved closer to Spider and Buck smiled.

Then, his smile died.

He considered the facts, adding and subtracting. He did not intend to keep a mile behind the loaded wagons. He had other plans. With Matt on the seat, it looked as if he still rode beside Spider LaMarr. The achievement of his plan depended much on this deception. He hoped that nobody had seen them make this switch of positions. He doubted if anybody had seen it. So far he had not seen a trace of a living being out in the buck-brush or in the timber. He let the wagons roll out of sight, and then he put the horse into the brush. He slid him down off the mountain-side, the animal's leg braced against the downward pull, and he came to a wild canyon creek—the creek was mad now, swollen with muddy water and debris. He put the horse across this and gained the other side.

Then, for a moment, he sat saddle, there in the tall grass of a small mountain park. On the side of the mountain, high above him, was the scarred edge of the road, looking like a snake curled along the mountain.

He had a good saddle-horse. He had a rifle and a short-gun, and he had a plan that should work.

He knew who was behind the trouble that had been encountered by Dunlap Stages. He knew, also, that these same people had caused trouble for Western Freight. And, by these tokens, he figured they would hit at this load, for on its safe delivery in Phoenix hung the future of Dunlap Stages.

He pulled the rifle out of its scabbard, jacked the breech open, and flipped out the cartridge, catching it in mid air. A good cartridge went into the barrel. He slipped the one he had caught into the magazine and restored the Winchester to the saddle-boot.

Then he rode into the thick buck-brush.

CHAPTER TWENTY

THERE was a pair of field-glasses tied to the saddle. Matt Dunlap had brought them with her on the stage and had tied them to the back of the kak. Also tied to the saddle-strings was a sack. Buck felt of it and made out the outline of long cartons. Shell-boxes of .30-30 cartridges for the rifle.

Matt had not overlooked a thing.

He had to play a careful game. He rode across the canyon's narrow bottom, found a trail that zigzagged up its side; he followed this and was glad his bronc was sure-footed. The trail lifted, moving back and forth; rain washed in and pine trees bent. Buck forgot his cold boots for once. This was a savage game, and his hide would be full of bullet-holes unless he shot first. The people involved kept moving across his memory, each with his implication of danger and death. Buck let his thoughts dwell on these personalities; that task, though, was unpleasant—so he thought of next week, when he and Tortilla Joe would be heading out of this Hardrock country, drifting south to where the sun made their clothes more fitting to the climate.

His horse slipped, almost falling off the trail. Hurriedly the lanky cow-puncher pulled the bronc upright, using the reins to lift him. Below them was a canyon—a fall of about a thousand feet. The bronc regained his footing, and Buck saw that the horse's shoulder-muscles trembled from fear. The trail at this point was very narrow, a slippery ribbon that had been ground out by the hoofs of deer and elk, going down into the canyon for water during the summer dry-spells. He watched his horse carefully, and they went upward—they also moved ahead to the south. They came to the long slant of the mountain, an almost level stretch of soil covered by high beargrass and bluestem. Here he made

better time as he moved always south toward Phoenix, the canyon between him and the wagon road.

All the time, too, he had kept the wagons in sight. He had seen no signs of humans. Possibly they had gone ahead? Maybe this plan would not work out right? There were these thoughts, insistent and alarming. He had to get ahead of the rig and scout the road.

Suddenly he drew his pony to a sliding halt, for the brush ahead seemed to explode without warning. Then he drew his hand away from his pistol as he saw the mule-tail buck-deer leave the rose-bushes on the run. The deer ran stiff-legged across a clearing, hopped over some high brush, and then the forest claimed him. Buck smiled and again rode on.

He rode into more brush, and this time his bronc shied, snorting as though he smelled something dangerous. Buck could see no enemy, but he knew the horse had smelled a bear that was hidden somewhere out in the timber. He used his spurs and got the horse past the clump of brush he feared. The horse immediately settled down, his fear gone.

Buck drove him harder. He ran him along the rimrock ridges, thereby keeping him and his mount hidden from possible eyes below; within twenty minutes he was ahead of the Dunlap Stages' wagons, only on the opposite side of the canyon. His glasses showed the two figures on the seat. Matt Dunlap, seated beside Spider LaMarr, looked, for all the world, like a man—like one Buck McKee. Admiration for the plucky matron was thick in Buck. Matt was in danger—it would be no picnic if suddenly a dynamite charge flared up, if the road heaved upward violently under the impact of black powder, if the rig and the heavy old pump suddenly swayed, then started to slide into the canyon. Such was the risk that Matt Dunlap was taking for an old man who lay on his sickbed miles away in Wyoming.

He went ahead of the rig about a mile, and then he drew his blowing mount to a stop, the ribs of the saddler rising and falling under his stirrup leathers. The field-glasses came out, and they searched the canyon below him, pulling

boulders and trees into proper perspective. They ranged over the wilderness, following the rim of the road; they saw no danger, and he wondered again if his plan would work. Its success depended upon many conjectures. Perhaps he had guessed wrongly. . . .

He knew now who had slugged him that day in the alley. He also knew who had tried to ambush him and kill him behind the Broken Lily Saloon. That telegram sent out of Phoenix and the telegram he had sent had taught him much. They had played a careful and methodical game, each move deliberately planned, and yet they had left an opening—and into this he had moved. The thought of what lay ahead was a wicked, driving thought and, because of its evil, it was a bad thought. Evil and corrupt, and under it for motivation lay the same old curse—greed. But with greed was also mixed another human emotion, love.

The rain had momentarily abated. The timber was alive with facets of reflected light as the brittle sunshine glistened on the wet brush and trees. There was the clean smell of tar-pitch, wild rosebushes bloomed, and beargrass grew as high as the belly of his bronc. He felt the cool sting of the slow wind coming down from the three snow-capped peaks to the north-east. The taste of this land was on his tongue, and it was fine and clean and bursting with Spring's promise; somewhere he heard the rush of running water as a creek moved down wildly toward the lower reaches. For a moment, then, he even forgot his wet and miserable boots.

He drove ahead of the Dunlap Stages' wagons, putting his bronc along the side of the peak, keeping always screened by brush and by timber. He saw an elk in a park, and the animal did not run; he raised his mighty horns and watched him for a while. Soon he returned to grazing. Back against the timber was a small log cabin with a sod roof, and Buck saw an old man cutting stovewood in front of it. Evidently the elk had been raised by the old timer and was his pet.

Buck rode over to the old man, who leaned on his axe

handle and watched him. Buck judged him to be in his eighties.

"Howdy, sir."

"Hello, young man."

Buck said, "Your elk?" and he said it to start conversation.

"Raised him from a calf. His mammy got killed by cougars and I took him in an' fed him on a bottle. He's a four-year-old."

"Had one when I was a kid. They get mean around children, though. They want to butt and strike them. So the Ol' Man got rid of him. He made fine chewin'."

"You're ridin' fer somethin'."

It was not a question. It was a statement. Sharp eyes studied him with keen scrutiny undulled by time.

Buck nodded. "How could you tell?"

"The lines aroun' your eyes. Not the eyes of a man at peace with the world. Then, too, you're out in this wilderness, quite a heap off the beaten path—and you ain't here because you love to look at the mountain an' the timber."

Buck said, "You're right. Have you seen any riders move through this brush this mornin'?"

"Would I help anybody if I told you?"

Buck shrugged. "I don't get your point?"

"They's been a lot of high-jackin' goin' on around here, they tell me. Miners has got their money lifted and a few has been killed."

"Nothin' like that. This is to keep somebody from gettin' killed, sir."

Again the old eyes probed him. The cracked lips opened as though to say something, but they said nothing; the old man turned without a word and walked into the cabin and closed the door. Buck shrugged and looked at the elk, who had moved in and stood about twenty feet away and watched him.

"Well, that told me nothing," he told the elk.

The elk watched him, then lowered his horns and pawed.

Buck swung up on his bronc and drifted out, mud kicking behind him. He left the park and the cabin and he thought, That old fellow is smart. He's got brains enough to keep his tongue silent, and that means a lot.

Again he was in timber.

From a high point he used his field-glasses. Tortilla Joe, by all tokens, should be somewhere below him, for the Mexican had the chore of following them out of Hardrock, the job of trailing them. Buck sent the glasses impatiently over the terrain. Below him a bald eagle perched in the branches of a pine, and Buck put the powerful glasses on him, bringing his noble and predatory head into clear view. The glasses were so powerful Buck could see the eagle's eyes, and he watched him for a moment, fascinated by the bird's rugged beauty. The eagle did not move; he perched on the thick branch, talons wrapped around the limb.

Buck knew that nobody was near to the eagle. Had any marauders come close, the eagle would have stretched his wings and would have flown away. A wild marauder—a bobcat or elk or deer or cougar—would not have scared him very much, for the eagle was safe with his talons and his high perch; but had a man or woman been around, the eagle would have taken flight. Buck knew, at this moment, a feeling of regret. For obviously the plan was not working.

His mind again reviewed this plan, and his mind again found loopholes in it. Perhaps they would not hit at the old pump, but would allow it to be taken successfully to Phoenix. Then the new pump would be loaded and hauled up the mountains to Hardrock, and they might hit at it to wreck it; the new pump was worth more to the mining company than the old, and its loss would be more expensive and would make the company cancel the Dunlap Stages' contract, for sure. There was this remote possibility. There was also the possibility that he was wrong all the way through. But this possibility did not seem logical. If he were wrong, then he and Tortilla Joe and Matt Dunlap would have to again start from scratch, and what suspects would be left?

They had to be right.

He was about two miles ahead of the Dunlap Stages' wagons. To his south about half a mile—and slightly to the west—was the big hill known as Chimney Butte. This was the roughest part of the trip, the steepest downward grade. It led down on to the alluvial cone of the desert; it was the last hill when you went to Phoenix, and the first you met when you came back toward Hardrock. Here they would have to make their play if they were to make one. Buck sent his field-glasses along the rim of the road and settled them on the summit of Chimney Butte.

A gaunt, ugly peak it was. The road slashed along it, winding in and out of its ravines—it looked like a wet and endless snake that had curled its length along the edge of the mountain. Fresnos and shovels had moved boulders out of the way; these rested along the rim of the road. They were jagged and clean now from the rain, grey hunks of granite. Below the road was timber—fir and pine and spruce that grew sparsely on the slope, for this grade was at a lower altitude, and fewer trees grew here.

Below the slope to the south stretched the desert—a majestic scene of utter and complete desolation. The floor of the desert was marked by jagged mesquite trees that grew in ravines, by towering Joshua trees that raised their hands in supplication to the Desert Gods, by *ocottilo* and barrel cacti. Buck had no eyes, though, for this desert beauty.

He was looking for some movement below him that would tell him a man moved or rode through the brush.

He did not find this movement.

Still, he used his glasses, and the thought came, Where is Tortilla Joe? Had they jumped the Mexican as he had trailed them, and had they killed him? There were other angles, too.

His attention was distracted by the movement of the Dunlap Stages' rig to the north-east. He swung his glasses on it and saw that it was still some distance away—at least a mile and one half. The seat was empty, for both

of its occupants were on the ground, rough-locking wheels for the descent on to Wild Creek. Going was slow, he decided; that was good.

He watched them work, and he realized that he would not have known that one labourer was a woman, had not he known for sure that Matt rode beside Spider LaMarr. For, even with the glasses on her, Matt looked like a man because of the heavy rain-coat and the wide rain-hat. He watched them for a while until they had the heavy log-chains in place. Then, the wheels rough-locked, Spider LaMarr got into the seat and they started down the grade, with Matt walking behind the heavy rig. They moved slowly, inching downward; then the heel of the mountain came in, obstructing Buck's view. And he put the glasses back toward the eagle.

The eagle was the bird to watch.

The eagle slumped on his perch, head down. Evidently his belly was full and he intended to rest. Once he spread his wings, seeking the outer limits of his reach, but this was a movement made preparatory to more resting. His wings folded back against his big body, and his head went lower.

Buck watched him, every detail clear.

Suddenly, the eagle lifted his head. He cocked his predatory head around, looking up the canyon; he seemed to listen. Then, without warning, he spread his wings, and he lifted his body into the air. He flew rapidly for altitude, found it, and then circled.

But Buck was not watching him now.

That eagle, he reasoned, had not been scared off his perch by some wild creature, but by a man. Buck watched, and he saw a man walking along the creek—a thin person, short and small.

He studied the person through the glasses

At this distance, though, identification was impossible.

He moved his glasses along the tangled matting of brush back up the creek. He was looking for a horse—two saddled horses, in fact. But the brush was thick and turned his gaze.

Still, he kept moving the glasses northward, looking for Tortilla Joe. He never found him.

Nor did he see but the one person. And that was not the way this should have worked out, he realized. There should have been two people. But the rain had thickened, and the brush was a barrier of undergrowth that turned his vision, and he could not penetrate either.

He watched the man below him for some time. The person had stopped, and now had pulled back into the timber. Evidently he had hidden in the brush. Buck watched a bare spot in the trail ahead. If the person moved ahead, he would have to cross that spot, and in it he would be visible.

But nobody crossed that small clearing.

Buck went back to this bronc, which was hidden in the pines. He put the field-glasses in their case, methodically strapped down the lid of the case, and then he pulled the rifle out of the saddle-boot.

The Winchester came out with a clean sound—the sound of steel on leather. He leaned it carefully against a tree, stock resting on a small rock to keep mud from its butt-plate.

He got a box of cartridges from the sack and spilled them in the pocket of his rain-coat. He took off his gunbelt and gun and buckled the belt over the coat so he could pull his .45 easier.

He tied his bronc to a tree and went down the mountain-side on foot, occasionally sliding on slippery spots of gumbo. He had no taste for the chore ahead. The thought came that perhaps he was wrong; perhaps the person he had seen was not the person he had expected to see. Identification, because of the rain and the distance, had been impossible.

He remembered the old man he had talked to. The old man was about the build of the person he had seen—small and slender and wiry. Perhaps the old fellow was hunting cotton-tails along the creek?

Buck moved ahead through the timber, rain washing over him. He worked downward, always downward; he kept an

eye open for Tortilla Joe, but he saw no sign of his partner. That was odd.

He reached the bottom of the canyon. On each side the green walls of timber and brush lifted toward the rain-soaked skies. The little creek boiled and jumped, swollen with rainwater.

He followed it, careful to make no noise. When he came to the approximate spot where the person had hid he drew back into the brush and worked behind that spot. To his east, rearing upward, was a timbered, rugged slope; on its summit was the treacherous part of the Hardrock-Phoenix trail known as Chimney Butte Hill. He sent a glance up the slope, saw nobody on it, and then he went ahead again. Carefully he worked his way and carefully he came behind the person.

He stood silent, watching, and his heart was lead. Then he stepped forward, rifle up, and he said, "Turn around, and don't try to reach for your gun! If you do, I'll kill you!"

And his voice was a savage croak.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

FOR a moment there was a deep silence, and then the slim person turned—and Buck faced the meeting he dreaded.

“McKee. . . .”

Buck said, “I’m sorry.”

Surprise lighted the dark eyes. Then this changed to a sultry dullness. “What are you doing here, McKee?”

“I could ask you the same, Nita.”

Nita Jorgenson spread her hands in a gesture that meant nothing. “I decided to go hunting today—that office work makes me damned sick of everything. Since Ma died I feel bad——”

Buck cut in, “You go hunting for cotton-tail rabbits with a rifle, Nita? Why not use a shotgun? And why not drop that rifle, girl?”

She had collected her wits by now. Colour had come back into her face and gave her a dark, savage look. She made no effort to drop the .25-30 rifle she had under her arm.

“McKee, what the hell is wrong with you? What are you talking about?” Her voice rose to a high pitch.

“Keep your voice down, woman!” Buck’s tone was authoritative. “No warnin’ to your partner, wherever he is, savvy?” He stepped forward quickly and tore the rifle from her grasp, slinging it to one side. “There’s a lot here you don’t know, Nita, and a lot you don’t figure I know about you, either.”

“What do you know about me?”

Buck moved back against a big fir tree. Now nobody could come in behind him. Anger showed harsh glints in the woman’s dark eyes, turned her lips down savagely. Buck spoke quietly, eyes never leaving her. She was a dangerous cat—cornered, but not whipped.

"You went back east to college. There you met a no-good punk who is now in jail back there. You're tryin' to raise money to get him out of jail. He needs lawyers, and you got good lawyers, but the lawyers need money. So you tried to control all of Dunlap Stages and Western Freight so you could make money for this punk."

"I don't know what you're talking about, McKee!"

"Oh, you don't, eh? Well, the punk's name is Lincoln Dunlap, and he's so damn' low he'd fight his own father, who is flat on his back with sickness. One thing is, you must love him, Nita."

"I still—don't understand."

"Oh, yes, you do, Nita. You loved him so much you turned against your own mother, and maybe somebody—maybe you—murdered your mother——"

"For Heaven's sake, McKee, don't say that——" She caught herself in time, and steadiness again held her eyes. "You talk like an idiot. You've never been east of Omaha, I'll bet, and you went there with cattle to market. You told me that once. Now you talk about the east—and college——"

"They have telegraph lines," Buck said quietly. "You wired Dunlap the other day in Phoenix. I made them show me a copy of the wire. I wired the dean of the university where you two went, and he told me about Dunlap being in jail—robbery and gambling—and his bail is twenty thousand. You'll never raise it now, Nita."

"You—know all this?"

"And more," Buck said. He had to get her away from this spot. There were two of them, and where was the other——?

"Get movin', Nita. Back this way, woman." He pushed her ungently and she stumbled into the brush. She landed sitting down, and she looked up at him with black rage in her eyes.

"You were sitting on that seat beside LaMarr when I looked a few minutes ago through my glasses! How come you're down here in such a hurry?"

"A trick, girl. That's Matt beside LaMarr."

"Matt who?"

"Dunlap. You know her as Matt Watson. She owns Dunlap Stages. She hired me and the Mexican to ride in—— But you're just playing ignorant. You know all this."

"The Mex, too? Tortilla Joe?" She cursed the Mexican with fluid curses.

Buck got her to her boots. She was not alone—there was another. That man was evidently up on the side of the mountain setting a charge of dynamite. He had to get her back in the deeper brush, tie her hand and foot hurriedly, and then gag her. He found himself throwing mental curses at Tortilla Joe. Tortilla Joe's job had been to trail this woman out from Hardrock.

From somewhere in the distance, up on the road, he heard the sounds made by mules and wagons—that would be Matt Dunlap and Spider LaMarr moving toward Phoenix. He could not see the rig because of the hill. With Nita Jorgenson ahead of him, he came to a thicket of wild willows, and he said, "Stand still now, woman."

"What—do you aim to do to me?"

"Put your hands behind your back. Where is the gent that is with you?"

"What man? Nobody is with me?"

"He up on the hill? Settin' out dynamite to blast the Dunlap Stages rig off the road?"

"Dynamite?"

She was stalling. He knew it. But there was nothing he could do. He tied her hands with a length of stout cord he carried in his slicker pocket. Ungently he pushed her to the ground and tied her ankles. Then he took off his silk scarf to gag her.

"You mentioned dynamite?"

Buck spoke quickly. "The day Tortilla Joe lost his stage—the day the passenger got killed—you mentioned college. That was my first clue. Then you picked up something, but I saw what it was—it wasn't a gold piece like you said."

"What was it?"

"A hunk of a dynamite cap."

"You don't talk sense."

His gag cut off her conversation. He was man-handling a woman; he didn't like this chore. But she was dangerous—perhaps she had killed a fellow human. One thing was certain—she was angry enough to kill him.

The whole deal had a sickening taste that clung to his palate. He had been forced to kill a man because of this nefarious ring of death. He had had to kill Kelly. Kelly, he knew now, had been hired by Nita to kill him. Deduction had shown him this glaring fact.

She lay at his feet—gagged, bound, unable to roll because he had lashed her to a tree. Only her eyes were alive—black with anger, boiling with hate. Again he heard the rig up on the road. He heard the jangle of tug chains, the creak of wheels, the rub on an axle. He picked up his rifle and was turning to hurry toward Chimney Butte cut when a voice spoke behind him.

"All right, McKee, stop right where you are! Let your rifle drop and keep your hand away from your short-gun, or I'll kill you!"

Buck halted. For a moment he stood still, a dry, clock-like sound in his brain as his blood pounded. Then this left and cold sanity took its place, and he turned and looked at the man who had come silently through the brush. He had a rifle on him, the bore black and threatening.

Buck looked at an ugly, hate-filled face. All the hate two men held or could hold toward each other was in their faces. Steadily they matched stares, and the man facing Buck smiled crookedly.

"Ol' Hackshaw himself, eh, McKee? We knew what your job was here. We should have killed you!"

"You tried," Buck said.

"We tried, and we failed. This time, though, you don't get out of this canyon, McKee. Now be a good boy and drop that rifle?"

Buck had no other choice. Eyes on the man, he dropped

the rifle; it hit the ground with a soft thud. The whole thing, Buck reasoned, was a lost cause. He had, in one sense, played right into their hands. He turned slightly and looked up at the grade overhead. Because of the steepness of the slope, he could see only the outer lip of the road.

"That dynamite has a time-cap," the man said. "It won't make much of a noise. It will make a dull thud, and it can't be heard up on the road, even. But it will loosen the soil enough to wreck that whole damned outfit."

"Like it wrecked the stage and killed that passenger, eh?"

The eyes narrowed. The rifle lifted, centred on Buck. Buck watched the greasy thumb ear back the hammer. The sound seemed loud. High on the road the rig creaked, the tug chains made noises. Buck saw the man's eyes line up the sights—they were metallic eyes, hard as steel bearings. He had to make a play soon, and he made it suddenly, without warning. About ten feet away, watching them, lay Nita Jorgenson—if he could get behind her.

He dived forward, teeth gritted. He heard the snarl of a rifle, and then he rolled; he wanted to get behind the girl, to use her for a living shield. She realized his plan endangered her. She doubled her legs and kicked, and she knocked his boots out from under him.

She kicked with the speed and agility of a young colt. Both bound legs hit Buck on the ankle of his right foot. His boots slipped and he fell. He realized he had not been shot. He had his gun on him, too; the man had not had time to get the weapon. He rolled over, came up with the .45 rigid, hand raised to slap across the hammer. But he never shot. Kneeling there, he watched, and his fear turned into a smile—a sickly smile.

For the man was going down, his knees bending. Behind him stood Tortilla Joe, grinning like a happy ape, and Tortilla Joe's rifle was raised. He hit again, and the man went down without a word to lie in the muddy grass.

"I came behind him, Buckshots, like he come behind you."

Buck got to his feet. His throat was so tight he couldn't speak. Finally he said, "Shoot three times, Tortilla, an' it will stop the wagons, fella. That's our signal with Matt."

"How about the dynamites?"

"We gotta let it go off. Shoot that rifle, quick."

Three times the Mexican's Winchester blasted flame into the rainy day. The wagons stopped and Matt Dunlap hollered down, "Who is down there?"

Buck said, "McKee and Tortilla Joe. We got them, Matt. Come on down."

When Matt and Spider LaMarr came into the clearing, the powder exploded. True to the prediction, it made a faint, earth-moving noise. A few rocks fell down the slope, caught in trees, then stopped. The wagons would have rolled over the spot and then would have slid into the canyon.

Spider LaMarr stopped, looked at the two they had captured. "I don't savvy this," he said.

Matt said, "Buck and Tortilla work for me."

"For you?"

"Yes, for me."

Matt walked over to the man Tortilla Joe had knocked unconscious. She knelt and rolled him over, and the loose and ugly face of Barrel MacShane looked up at them, the lips open, the mouth sagging.

"Knocked cold," Matt said.

Again Spider LaMarr looked from Nita to Barrel MacShane. "Workin' together, eh? Well, I always suspected MacShane, at that." His gaze swung back to Matt, and it held curiosity. "Buck an' this Mex work for you, eh? Come on, woman, who are you, to have them hired?"

"I'm not Matt Watson."

The moment Buck had awaited had arrived. He watched the long and slender face of Spider LaMarr curiously. Tortilla Joe, grinning openly, watched LaMarr, too. Matt smiled slightly.

"I'm Matt Dunlap, Spider. Owner of Dunlap Stages."

Buck saw Spider's tongue come out and wet his lips. Then Spider LaMarr sat down on a handy pine stump.

"My boss," he said, "My boss. . . ."

Two sets of boots rested on a polished rail in front of a saloon. They were polished boots all four of them, and the feet inside them were dry and warm. Outside the New Mexican sun blessed the dust with heat. The Rio Grande murmured as it slipped across claybank soil to head for El Paso. To the east the scarp walls of the Organ Mountains seemed to reach up to caress the sky.

Buck McKee said, "Another shot of *tequilla*, Charlie."

Charlie poured and looked at Tortilla Joe. "An' what for you, frien'?"

"*Tequilla*, too."

Charlie filled Tortilla Joe's glass. Charlie stepped back and corked the bottle. "Your feet warm, Buck?"

"At long last," Buck McKee said.

Charlie put the bottle on the shelf. "You're my best customers. Been here three weeks and paid all the way. You must've made some dinero up north. Up around Colorado, weren't you?"

"Arizona."

Charlie wiped the bar with a rag. Outside a snappy team of sorrels came into view, pulling a new buggy. On the buggy seat was one man who was dressed in the highest fashion—bowler hat, spats, black shoes, a cutaway suit and a white shirt. He wore a tie that would put a sunset to shame.

Tortilla Joe said, "He look familiar, Buckshots."

Buck studied the man over his glass. "He sure does." The man came off the seat, tied his team to the hitch-rack, and came into Charlie's Place.

"Howdy, McKee. Howdy, Tortilla Joe."

Buck said, "Webster, the photographer." He looked up and down the man's splendour. "You sure didn't bum a ride into Ol' Messilla like you did into Hardrock. You must've hit a lot of suckers up there."

"Made a killin', Buck, but had to get out—needed drier climate for my lungs. Still rainin' up there. I left last week. You boys are drinkin' on me. Name your poison."

They reordered.

Buck turned his glass slowly. "Well, how did it all turn out, Webster? I reckon you stayed for the trial?"

"Saw it from end to finish."

Buck said, "Tell us, friend."

"Si," Tortilla Joe said. "You tell us the news, no?"

"Well, that sworn deposition you boys filed—it turned the case in court. They hired top lawyers, but they got the works."

Buck listened, face sombre. And in memory he returned to the high wilderness of Arizona Territory, and he saw again the muddy street of Hardrock, heard the stamp-mills pound and felt them jar the earth.

"Nita got five years in the pen. She got off lucky. Barrel MacShane drew life, for they proved he planted the dynamite that made the stage slide off the grade and kill the passenger."

Buck nodded.

Tortilla Joe said, "And who keeled Ma Jorgenson?"

"Couldn't prove either Nita or Barrel killed her. They both swore they were innocent. Everybody figures she did kill herself, so they let it rest at that. Matt Dunlap waited and cleared up things and then went back to Denver."

"What happened to the boy—Lincoln—who was behind the whole thing?" Buck asked.

"They arrested him back east, and he hanged himself with his belt in the jail. The news hit ol' Hank Dunlap hard Matt said. She told me to tell you boys that Hank got up and is around. She figured I'd head down here to see you. That mountain is too cold for me."

Buck had no reply. He was thinking of Lincoln Dunlap—a man he had never seen—and he was thinking of Nita Jorgenson, and of her fierce love for Lincoln Dunlap. Well,

life was life, and there was nothing he could do about it. Maybe there was such a thing called Fate, at that.

Suddenly he smiled. "Did Marshal White get my letter?"

Webster pounded the bar until Charlie, who was listening but not understanding, had a fear that his bar might collapse or that Webster might accidentally break his fist.

"Buck, White went hog wild, I tell you! He ranted and raved. He even wanted the Territorial Governor to extradite you and Tortilla Joe from wherever you were and drag you back to Hardrock. He claimed that if he ever got you two in his jail you'd be in for life."

Buck glanced at his partner. "We'd better stay out of Arizona."

"From Hardrocks, anyway."

"White got a shovel and dug up that record, an' then him an' Spider LaMarr was the laughin'-stock of Hardrock. They jibed Spider so much he done quit Dunlap Stages and went to South America. One of the mines hired him and transferred him. Every time Spider turned around somebody ribbed him about Matt Dunlap. Got so towards the last all Spider wanted to do was pick a fight."

"What about Greenshade?" Buck asked.

"You was right about him furnishin' information to Lincoln Dunlap. He was the one that notified Lincoln that you and Tortilla Joe was being sent to Hardrock. Nita confessed that Barrel MacShane was the gent that slugged you in the alley, and he was the fellow you exchanged shots with the day a bullet creased Tortilla Joe."

"We forget that day, no? I do not like to theenk of eet, Webster."

"Greenshade sure caused a lot of damage." Buck turned his *tequilla* glass slowly. "Did they put him in the clink, too?"

"I don't know about that. Anyway, the case is marked *closed* in the docket up there. And I guess that's what counts, ain't it?"

Buck nodded.

Tortilla Joe nodded.

Buck raised his glass. "We gotta drink to somebody to have an excuse for drinkin'." He scowled, then smiled. "To His Honor, Marshal White."

"To Marshal White," Tortilla Joe said.

Webster grabbed his glass. "Wait for me," he said hurriedly.

THE END

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